



# TAKING CHANCES

*Second in the Bradford Series*

CHRISTINA PAUL

# **Taking Chances**

Christina Paul

*Taking Chances* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locals or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Dedication:

For III - you were never one for grand romantic gestures or flowery words, but your quiet, unwavering strength has made me love you all these years. And for PJ, AlyssaLynn & Daniella – you are my pride and joy; a mom couldn't be blessed with better children.

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[A Second Chances](#)

[Corporate Blues](#)

### **Coming Soon:**

Faerie Tale Queen

Simply by Chance

# Reviews

**Your book has been named the Finalist of the 2014 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. Congratulations!**

Tim D - Terrific writing. Felt like I was in the story and personally knew the characters! (Sep 2014)

Jan R - Second Chance is not your run of the mill romance. It is funny, romantic and heartwarming. (Mar 2014)

K. Edwin F -This is a woman who is confident in what she wants and.. ahem... who she wants. A thoroughly enjoyable read. Can't wait to see where this series goes. (Feb 2014)

Tracy B - It's one thing I love because it shows that you don't need constant sex in a book to enjoy romance novels. (Feb 2014)

Julien A - Character development is excellent and the story will hold your attention throughout. I loved every page of this book and can't wait to read the third in a series that has me hooked. (Jan 2014)

Linda R - Fast paced read, full of intrigue, with wonderful characters in a lovely historical setting. (June 2013)

Dorothy M - Warning: If you read it (A Second Chance), you will be compelled to get "Taking Chances". Fortunately, it is available on Amazon. Lucky for you. (Mar 2013)

Marcy F. - I loved the fact that your heroine(s) had spunk. Full of life and they were protectors not damsels only in distress ALL the time. (Mar 2013)

Alan B. - Great story flow, characterization and plot. Your style matches what I'd expect to hear from people in that time if I was there - in fact I felt like I was. (Mar 2013)

Rebecca S. - I really enjoyed this book! I couldn't put it down and finished it too quickly. (Oct 2012)

Lisa C - You have a terrific writing style. Your book reads like a movie in my mind. You have crafted a quality piece of writing. (May 2012)



Christian Bradford sat alone at a corner table of the Lambeth pub, absentmindedly toying with the pint in front of him. His brooding grey eyes ever watchful as he scanned the room, ears strained to filter out the individual conversations taking place around him. One particular group has been his focus for the past several nights, but the more he listened, the more he concluded the information his Uncle Aaron received from an informant, was completely off the mark.

His uncle was one of the top brass for an elite covert agency, answering directly to the Crown. He had received information a group of men had been overheard discussing the abduction of the Archbishop of Canterbury, so he sent Christian to investigate. The group in question was now plotting the abduction of the American president Thomas Jefferson, and the night before the Pasha of Tripoli had been in their sites. Christian concluded the group harmless, slightly addled, but harmless nonetheless. He would have to pay the informant a visit in the morning to reemphasize that if he wanted to continue receiving compensation for his information, he had better be more discriminating.

Deciding he had had enough of the rat hole, Christian pushed his watered-down ale aside, settled his tab and left the pub. Despite the unseasonably cold weather they had been having, the stench from the burn was particularly pungent this night, adding to his already surly mood. His face itched from over a week's worth of beard growth, his clothes were grimy, and he was in desperate need of a bath. Normally the measures he took to blend into the surroundings would not annoy him so, but the last two times he was on assignment his efforts turned out to be all for naught. It had been several months since he had done anything exciting and he was itching for an adventure.

The last adventure had been in the early spring, and although that one hit entirely too close to home, it was better than what he was doing now, which was nothing. A crazed man, who blamed Christian's uncle for his son Jacob's death, had kidnapped

Christian's cousin, Anna. Christian's father, Graydon, had been shot and nearly killed during the initial pursuit of the kidnappers, but he had been found and nursed back to health by a lovely widow, Kathryn, who turned out to be the mother of two of the operatives with whom Christian worked.

The intertwining was enough to make one's head spin, but in the end, Anna was saved, his father and Kathryn fell in love and were married, and all was right with the world, well, Christian's world at least. His contentment did not last long, for as usual, wanderlust was edging in, and he had no desire to curtail it.

He was walking to where he had tethered his horse. He could not very well bring the animal right to the pub, for the station of the person he was trying to portray surely would not own such a fine beast, so he warily left the animal in the care of a street urchin a few blocks away. He gave the boy a few coins to care for the horse and promised him several more if, when he returned, no harm had come to his prized possession.

As he rounded the corner, a woman's cry caused him to pause. He turned to see three figures in the shadows on the far side of the street nearest the river. Christian strained his eyes against the darkness as he watched the reluctant female ineffectively fight against her two attackers. She let out a scream as one of the men threw her to the ground.

At first he thought it was a prostitute being handled roughly by her clients and was about to turn away, but when she landed on the ground, the street lamp illuminated just enough of her attire for Christian to realize she was no prostitute. He muttered an oath as he advanced on the trio. *What in the name of all that is holy is a lady doing in this part of town?* Silently he came upon the men, they were unaware of his presence until he spoke. In a menacing baritone he growled, "It would appear the lady is not interested in what you are offering."

The two brutes turned their attention toward him, the first saying, "I wanna be concernin' yeself with our business if you know what's good for ye." Christian just glowered at the men, fortified his stance, and braced for the inevitable attack. "Looks like this one's be needin' a bit more convincin'," the second one sneered as he advanced.

Deftly Christian dodged the man's swing and countered with

his own, landing the jab into the man's throat causing him to crumple to the ground immediately, gasping for air. Without missing a beat, he spun around and with a high kick of his boot, he caught the other man in the jaw, sending him tumbling backwards into the river. Christian straightened, surveyed the area for any other would-be attackers.

He looked at the man at his feet and determined he was making far too much noise, so he hoisted him up by his collar and the seat of his britches and sent him to meet his friend. Satisfied with his effective trash disposal technique, he brushed off his hands and turned toward the woman. She was curled up on the ground, beneath the streetlamp, in the fetal position.

Samantha watched in awe and horror as a giant of a man made quick work of the two slightly smaller brutes who had attacked her and killed her father. Now he was coming toward her and her only thought before total blackness overtook her was she had fallen out of the pot and into the fire.

Christian knelt by the unconscious woman, she had been roughed up a bit, her lip was bleeding, there was a bruise forming on her brow, and the wrist she landed on when she was thrown was swelling, but he doubted any other serious damage had been done. Knowing very well he could not just leave her lying on the street, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to his horse.

He was relieved to find the horse where he had left him, "You did good lad." Shifting the woman's slight weight, Christian reached into his pocket, pulled out a few more coins and tossed them to the boy. "Now, if you would be so kind as to hold the reins while I mount, it would be very much appreciated. This horse does not much like having two riders, so hold tight." The child, now in possession of more money than he had ever had in his life, was more than happy to do the gentleman's bidding.

The horse staggered at the uneven mounting, then snorted and shook his head as he righted himself. Christian settled the woman in his lap then took the reins from the boy, gave him a smile and a little salute, and was off at a breakneck...walk. He did not want to take a chance in jostling her too much, the swelling in her wrist was getting worse and he now feared it might be broken.

It took most of an hour for Christian to reach his townhouse. He maneuvered his horse under the open window of his butler's room and let out a low whistle, then a second louder one. A bleary-eyed

older man appeared in the opening grumbling, "I left the bloody door open for you, or are you too sauced to open the damn thing yourself?"

"Hugh you are a fright when your beauty sleep has been interrupted. Actually, I am in need of assistance. This young lady somehow managed to wander into a most unsavory part of town and was attacked. I worry her wrist may be broken, so I do not want to hoist her over my shoulder in order to dismount. If you would be so kind..."

Hugh blinked twice to remove the sleep from his eyes so he could adequately take in the sight before him. When it registered in his sleep-fogged head that Christian did have an obviously unconscious woman in his arms, he sobered instantly and said in a rush, "Of course, just let me don some more appropriate clothing and I shall meet you out front." When Hugh disappeared from view, Christian nudged his mount to the front of the house.

Hugh was on the stoop within a few minutes. Christian told him, "You should not have any problem with her, I swear she is all gown and petticoats, there is nothing to her. Do watch that left arm of hers," he added as the older man reached up to take the girl.

"I will bring her into the house so you can put that beast away. Conrad should be in the stable to take him from you." *Christian was right*, Hugh thought, the girl was as light as a feather, he had no trouble bringing her into the house and setting her down on the settee. "Not too shabby for an old man, I am not even winded," he praised himself aloud as he went to start a fire in the hearth.

When the task was done, he lit some lamps so he could see the extent of their new charge's injuries. For the most part, she only had scrapes and bruises, but her wrist was very swollen and discolored. He rose just as Christian entered the room, "I am going to get some water and bandages. I will also see what I can find to wrap her wrist so it does not move."

"Was I right? Is it broken?"

"Looks to be, let us just hope it sets properly. I should hate to cause the poor child any undue pain."

When Hugh left, Christian knelt by the woman, she looked so tiny and helpless. The pale complexion made her bloodied fat lip and bruised brow stand out, her blonde hair was dirty and tangled and her

clothes would need some serious mending. He stole a glance at her left hand, the fingers were nearly twice the size they should have been and she had a lump the size of an egg on the pinky side of her hand just above where he assumed her wrist started. The swelling went half way up her forearm, he cringed.

Hugh returned with some warm water and cloths, "Why not try and clean her up a bit, I just thought of something we could use to brace her arm. I will be back," and he whirled out of the room again in a flurry.

Christian scowled at the man's retreating back. With a sigh, he dipped a cloth in the water and wrung it out. Gingerly he dabbed at the dirt and dried blood near her mouth until it was removed, then he cleaned around the scratch by her eyebrow. When the two moderately injured areas were finished, he washed the remaining dirt from her face. Hugh had not returned. Methodically he rinsed out the cloth. Still no Hugh. With a heavy sigh of resignation, Christian started to bathe the only dirty area left, her hand. It took him three attempts before cloth actually touched skin. Sweat had formed on his brow and a knot in his stomach. *Why could not this be some big burly gent? Why did it have to be a woman?*

The one thing Christian could not stomach was an injured woman, he was so large and she was so small, he was terrified he would do her more harm than good. He knew his phobia was irrational and illogical, he had no problems when his cousin Anna got into a scrape when they were kids. Hell, half the time he had caused most of her injuries, letting her climb the trees with him and his friends or any of the number of things which brought them both home bruised and bloodied.

*Get over it you coward*, he castigated himself. He took a deep cleansing breath, gritted his teeth and set to his task. Gingerly he wiped the dirt from her hand and arm, taking great care not to move it any more than absolutely necessary. The girl whimpered when he swept the cloth over her palm, but thankfully, she did not wake. *Where the hell was Hugh?*

On cue with Christian's mental summons, Hugh reentered the parlor, "Sorry I took so long, I needed to go to the wood pile behind the stables." When given a perplexed look, he elaborated, "Do you remember the old tree that fell during the storm a few weeks ago?" Christian grunted not looking any more enlightened then he was a moment before. "The tree had thick bark which came off in sheets. I

cut two pieces. If we pad her wrist, then place one piece on the top and one on the bottom, then wrap the whole thing, her arm should be sufficiently braced.”

“Brilliant my good man, brilliant. You may have missed your calling.”

“Hardly, I have had entirely too much practice with Anna, your father, and you. The last thing I would ever want is to be doing this sort of thing on a regular basis.” Shooing the younger man out of the way, he crouched next to the patient. Her clean hand had him raise an eyebrow at Christian, “You bathed her?” Christian gave the butler a pained look and the man chuckled, “Well, thank you, but I will take it from here. Now, go upstairs and get cleaned up. If this child should wake and get a good look at you, she is liable to swoon all over again. You look positively dastardly.”

Quite happy to be given a reprieve, Christian left Hugh to his task, which he set about completing immediately. He tore strips of soft fabric and loosely wrapped her wrist with them. Keeping the bark in place while he attempted to secure it proved to be a challenge, but he finally managed. A second set of hands would have made the chore a heck of a lot easier, but truth be told, he was amazed Christian did as much as he had. Christian’s squeamishness was so out of character with the rest of his persona, and his embarrassment at the flaw was quite comical. Hugh chuckled to himself while he cleaned up the mess they had made. He had just finished when the girl started to stir.

## 2

Samantha's eyes flew open in startled terror as images assailed her memory. The last thing she could recall was a scruffy monster of a man tossing her attackers into the burn. With a gasp, she sat bolt upright and stared wildly around the room. Her eyes landed on Hugh and he smiled at her and said, "You are quite safe my dear, no need to fret. How are you feeling?"

Pausing a moment to take inventory she replied on a sigh, "I have been better I am afraid. Where am I?"

"You are in Master Christian Bradford's town home in Oxford. He retrieved you from a rather seedy part of town. Do you recall anything?"

"Unfortunately almost everything..." She was about to explain when Hugh stopped her, "Master Bradford shall be down shortly, save your energy. This way you will only need to explain once. Would you care for something to drink?"

"Yes please, thank you." Samantha raised her hand to her mouth gently probing her fat lip, then her sore eyebrow. "I must look a fright."

"Considering what you must have gone through, I would say you fared pretty well. That wrist may prove to be bothersome," Hugh pointed out.

"'Tis throbbing like the dickens, I thought I heard a small crack when I fell. 'Tis broken 'tisn't it?"

"I would say so. I have braced it and wrapped it well. I shall look at it again in the morning, we should be able to judge better at that time."

"In the morning? Oh no Sir, I could not possibly impose, and I must find my father and ..."

"Your father allowed you to walk alone along the

waterfront?" Christian's deep voice accused as he reentered the room. His hair wet, slicked back and tied at the nape. He was freshly shaven and had changed into clean clothes, all in all he was quite presentable, except for the fierce scowl upon his face.

Hugh shot him a disapproving glare when he saw the expression on Samantha's face. "May I present to you Master Christian Bradford m'lady..." Now it was Hugh's turn to be startled, she had risen from the settee and looked positively mutinous.

"Thank you Sir, and I am Miss Samantha Prichard," she said to the butler, giving him only the slightest acknowledgement before her angry eyes met Christian's head on. "My father did not allow me to wander about the waterfront unescorted. We were in our carriage, heading home, when some men stopped us. They pulled my father out of the carriage, argued with him for a few moments, and then, I fear, killed him. Next, they pulled me out and dragged me down by the river. Finally some mountain of a man tossed both of them into the river and somehow I ended up here." She turned back to Hugh and said, "Thank you Sir for your care, but I really must go and find my father."

She started to head for the door but Christian was blocking it, and from the set look on his face, he did not intend to move any time soon. "And what exactly do you plan on doing with your father when and if you find him?" He challenged.

His question irked her for she had not thought that far ahead. Surely, she would not be able to get her father's body into a carriage to bring him home for a proper burial, and she did not even want to think about traveling with a dead body for several days. Nevertheless, whom did he think he was, questioning her?

With great effort to keep her tone pleasant, she countered, "That Sir should be none of your concern. Again, I thank you for your hospitality, but I really must go. If you would step aside so I could pass..."

"No." Christian widened his stance and folded his arms across his broad chest.

"No? NO?" her voice raised an octave as fire blazed in her eyes. "How I see it, you have absolutely no say in the matter. Now, I must insist you step aside and let me pass."



“What kind of man would I be if I let an injured lady go wandering the streets at night alone? And how do you suppose you would get your father’s body into a hack alone? And if by some miracle you do manage to get him in, what are you going to do with him?” He stared into her scowling face and said, “I am going with you. Do you think you will recognize the area where your father might be?”

He was right, damn him. There was no way she would be able to retrieve her father’s body alone. Swallowing her pride, she nodded averting her eyes from his penetrating gray ones.

“Hugh, rouse Murphy and have him bring the carriage around front, then get me some blankets. We will need them to wrap Mr. Prichard’s body,” he winced at the insensitivity of his words. When the butler left, Christian turned to Samantha and compassionately asked, “Are you sure you are feeling well enough to ride back into town? You could just describe the area and I could look for you.”

She sighed as she shook her head, then raised her eyes to meet his, “‘Tis my duty to tend to my father,” she said with far more bravado than she felt.

“Let’s have at it then,” he said as he placed a hand on the small of her back and gently nudged her from the room.

### 3

After he assisted her into the carriage, Christian instructed Murphy to return them where he had found Samantha by the waterfront. Other than her barely audible wince when the carriage hit a bump, they sat in complete silence during the ride. When they drew to a stop Christian's voice penetrated the darkness, "Are you sure you are feeling up to this? I could ..."

"No," was all she said.

"Very well then, shall we?" he climbed out the door, turned around, clasped his hands around her tiny waist and lifted her to the ground. "Murphy, follow us with the carriage, I will need your help when we find Mr. Prichard."

They had stopped under the streetlamp where he found her, Christian studied her face as she looked around acclimating herself to her surroundings. Finally, she said as she pointed, "They dragged me from the street over there."

As they started to walk, Christian signaled with his head for Murphy to follow. They crossed the street and turned right, then headed up the narrow street, hardly more than an alley, with structures looming up on either side. Murphy was forced to make the precarious journey at a snail's pace for fear of ruining the carriage or worse yet, injuring the horses.

When they emerged on the other side, Samantha stopped to get her bearings. She looked around and pointed again, this time to the left. Christian could make out through the darkness ahead a lump on the ground lying on the fringe of the lamplight. He quickened his step until he reached the fallen man, then he knelt alongside him. Murphy had pulled the carriage to where Christian was kneeling and climbed down.

Christian looked back at Samantha and asked the obvious, "Your father?" She gave him a stiff nod but said nothing. Mr. Prichard

was in fact dead, blood stained the front of him where he had been stabbed. His pockets had been rifled through, but strangely, it seemed all of their contents were lying on the ground near him, and his very expensive gold pocket watch and chain were still in place. Apparently, this was not a case of a robbery. Christian leaned back on his haunches and asked Samantha, "You were traveling by carriage?"

She nodded, "A hired one, the bouncer of a driver turned tail the moment they dragged me from the back."

"Did it appear he recognized the attackers?"

Samantha blinked and furrowed her brow, "I do not recall him even glancing my way, but then again I was otherwise preoccupied."

Christian was trying desperately to keep his tone light and not make this feel like an interrogation, but he needed more answers. "Did you happen to hear what they said to your father? You mentioned he had argued with the men."

Samantha drew in a breath and squared her shoulders before she spoke, "One kept yelling 'Where is it?' and I heard my father say they would never find it. They asked me the same thing and were none too pleased when I had no inkling what 'it' was."

Christian digested her words for a few moments before he spoke, "Murphy, help me get Mr. Prichard wrapped in the blankets and onto the back of the carriage, it will be plenty cold enough tonight that he should be fine."

"Very good Sir," the man replied as he jumped to do the younger man's bidding. For some reason Christian was continuing with this pretense, he would have to get the details from him when they returned home, but for now Murphy would keep up his end of the charade.

With their gruesome task completed, Christian said to Murphy, "When we get back to the house, I want you to put the carriage away, then get word to my uncle to meet me at his office in the morning, tell him it is urgent." He turned to Samantha to offer her assistance into the carriage so they could leave, and was rather startled, she had her good hand on her hip, legs braced, and even through the meager light, he could see the fire shooting from her eyes. Raising an eyebrow, he leaned his shoulder against the carriage and

folded his arms across his chest, then casually asked, “Is something amiss?”

It took Samantha several moments to get her anger in check. *Exactly who did he think he was making decisions on what to do with her father?* After a few cleansing breaths she managed to regain her composure, “Thank you Sir for your assistance thus far,” she gritted her teeth as she added, “I could not have gotten this far without your aid. However, I would prefer if no one else have knowledge of my father’s untimely demise. If you would be so kind as to let me rent your carriage and man so I may bring my father home for a proper burial, I would be grateful.”

“My carriage and Murphy are at your disposal, but not until morning. We have all had a harrowing evening and would benefit greatly from the rest. We will leave first thing in the morning, if that is acceptable to you.” He ended with a ridiculously over-exaggerated bow as he opened the carriage door.

At first Samantha did not move, grudgingly she had to admit he was right, again, even though the admission stuck in her craw. *Ooo, damn him again.* Reluctantly she gave him an acquiescing nod, went to his side and allowed him to assist her into the carriage.

They had only traveled a few blocks before Christian asked, “Are you sure you do not know what the men were referring to?”

“I am quite sure,” she replied haughtily.

He was not buying it. A little voice inside was telling him not to accept this girl at face value, there was something she was holding back. “Perhaps you could tell me what line of work your father was in?”

“Nathanial Prichard was a very fine man, and I am sure he would not approve of his daughter discussing his affairs with a stranger. You have been very generous Sir, for which I am grateful, but if it is all the same to you, I would prefer to let my brothers decipher what has happened.”

“Brothers?”

“Yes, I have three. Patrick is the eldest, he and his family live in Wales. Liam, my twin, and our younger brother Séamas live at my grandparent’s estate in Ireland. My mother inherited it when they

passed, then after she passed, my brothers were allowed to take possession. So as you can see, I have ample family to take care of our situation.”

He could see none of the such, but he was willing to let it go as not to rile her. When they got back to the house, he would pen his uncle a note and have Murphy deliver it. It looked as though there would be a trip to Ireland in his future.

Samantha awoke the next morning when a portly older woman entered her room, “Good morning Miss. I am Isabel. Master Christian told me to come and assist you this morning. Your bath will be here in a moment, and Lady Suzanne sent over a fresh dress and undergarments for you to change into.” There was a knock at the door, “Aha, there is your bath now,” she said as she opened the door. Samantha drew the blankets up to her chin as Murphy entered carrying a large tub, followed by three more servants with buckets of steaming hot water. Samantha managed a weak smile of thanks as the entourage left the room after filling the tub.

“Come now my dear, let us get you cleaned up,” Isabel ordered. Wordlessly Samantha obliged. “Arms up,” Isabel instructed as she helped Samantha out of her chemise. Taking her arm, she helped Samantha into the tub, “Now keep your wrapped arm over the edge so you do not soak your bandages. There’s a good girl. Does it pain you much my dear?”

Samantha spoke for the first time, “Terribly at the moment, but it is far better than it was last night. Thank you for asking.”

“You will be happy to know the swelling on your lip has gone down completely, and there is only a tiny scratch on your brow which is just a little puffy, hardly noticeable a’tall.” She rambled on as she was lathering Samantha’s hair, “You poor thing. Hugh told me all about what happened to you last night, simply dreadful my dear. I cannot kin what this town is turning into when a lady cannot take a carriage ride without the fear of being accosted. Please stand.”

Samantha did as she was told and Isabel poured fresh water over her to rinse her. “Out you go.” Isabel helped her climb out of the tub and wrapped her in a massive towel. “Go sit by the fire and I shall tend to your hair.” Although Samantha was starting to feel like a child doing her nanny’s bidding, it was nice being coddled. Truth be told, she was far too weary this morning to fend for herself. She sat quietly

as Isabel dried her hair with another towel then patiently combed out the tangles, chattering the entire time.

By the time Samantha was dressed she knew Isabel had been widowed for five years, her beloved Johnny had been the stable master for Sir Graydon, Christian's father, she had three sons and four daughters, and was now blessed with twenty-three grandchildren, whom she did not get to see as often as she would like. "There you go Miss, pretty as a picture. Now come with me, 'tis time you break your fast, and Hugh wants to take a look at that arm of yours before you leave for home."

"Thank you Isabel, you have been very kind."

"Awe 'twas nothing Miss."

Isabel led Samantha to the parlor and told her to sit while she fetched Hugh and some food. She had barely a moment to take in her surroundings before Hugh came into the room, arms laden with bandages and something which looked suspiciously like tree bark. He saw the incredulous look on her face and said, "Good morning Miss. I do hope you slept well." He smiled as he went on, "Now do not be giving me that look, we used the bark to brace your wrist. It is sturdy enough to hold it, yet light enough so you will not find it overly cumbersome. I shall wrap it like I did last night so no one will be none the wiser you have a tree strapped to your arm." He gave her a mischievous grin, and to his delight, she giggled. Sobering he asked, "Does it pain you terribly my dear?"

Samantha gave him a shy smile and said, "Not overly so now. When I first woke, I must admit, it was awful."

"I am afraid it will be like that for several more days before it starts to heal and feel better." His posture changed slightly, when he knelt near her to change the dressing on her arm, as if he were bracing himself for a dreaded task. Slowly he cut away the top layer of cloth, then he asked, "Would you hold under here so the bark does not stop supporting your wrist?" more to get her to do something other than stare at him. When the bandages were gone, he lifted the top support off. Sensing her tense, he asked, "Are you alright?"

She nodded never taking her eyes off her arm, "I was just surprised to see more wrappings."

"I could not very well put the bark against your delicate skin,

it would have rubbed it raw. May I proceed or do you need a moment?"

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath, then let it out slowly and shook her head, "Let us just get this over with."

"I shall cut the next layer before we remove the last piece of bark, this way you will not have to keep your arm unsupported for too long."

She nodded and watched as the butler sliced through the layers of cotton cloth with painstaking care. When he revealed her wrist, she was relieved it was not as bad as she feared. Oh it was swollen and discolored, but it was not malformed, it would heal. As if he read her mind, Hugh let out a sigh and said, "It is in much better shape than I thought last night. It should heal just fine ... only bother you when it rains." He chuckled at her expression over his off-handed remark, then she joined him in the laugh.

"Now I can commiserate right along with the old folks on the estate who swear they can predict the weather by the aching in their bones." Samantha giggled outright, bringing a big smile to Hugh's face. He genuinely liked this young lady, she was strong and witty and most of all, did not cower to Christian. The young man was going to have his hands full on his trip to Ireland.

Christian watch the two unnoticed from the hallway, the exchange between his normally overly crotchety butler and Samantha was unusual. She actually had the old coot firmly wrapped around her little finger, grudgingly he had to admit he knew why. Now that she was all cleaned up and was smiling instead of scowling, she was quite lovely. The sound of her laughter tugged at him in an unfamiliar way. He smiled as he entered the room, "Good day to you," he greeted pleasantly.

Samantha's back stiffened and her smile faded when she heard Christian's voice. She knew she was being childish, but she bristled at the way he was taking charge of a situation, which was truly none of his concern. However, impeccable breeding forced her to return his greeting, "Good day to you Sir."

Undaunted by the change in her demeanor, he continued, "Are you feeling better this morning?"

"A bit."



*Very well, if that was the way she was going to behave...* He took a breath and squared his shoulders, "After you have broken your fast, we must be on our way. I need to call on my uncle at his office to tell him I will be away for at least a fortnight."

"Honestly, there is no need for you to accompany me, as I have said before, this is none of your affair," Samantha protested.

"This is not up for discussion. I cannot allow you, or anyone else for that matter, travel unescorted when there are villains lying in wait for him. Now please, do make haste," he commanded and left the room. He knew if he had stayed, an ensuing argument was bound to erupt, and quite frankly he was not up to a sparring match this morning. After only a few hours sleep, he was up packing for the trip, making provisions for his house to run smoothly during his absence, plotting the route they needed to take, and trying to figure out the best way to do it all with a corpse in tow. No, the last thing he needed this morning was to lock horns with the lovely vixen in his parlor.

Much to his surprise, Samantha was back in the vestibule within fifteen minutes, a basket of food which Isabel had packed over her good arm, and a belligerent expression on her face. Christian did not speak a word, he merely took the basket from her and held the door open for her to leave. A biting wind assailed them as they left the house. This cloudy twenty-second day of October was the coldest he could remember in a long time, the weather usually did not turn this bitter this early in autumn. However, considering their cargo, it was probably for the best.

As they neared his uncle's office, Christian broke the silence, "You are welcome to come in with me or you may stay out here, 'tis your choice."

"Since the subject of my father is bound to be the topic you will be discussing, I think I will join you."

"As you wish," he replied as he exited the carriage, very ungallantly leaving her to her own devices. For the first time he was actually regretting his decision to help the chit. The next few weeks were bound to be odious at best. Chivalry getting the better of him, he did wait for her at the top of the stairs leading into the building, and held the door. She gave him a feral glare as she flounced past, but refrained from commenting.

Christian was surprised to see an unusual amount of chaos

when they stepped into headquarters, there were men scurrying everywhere. He bumped into a man on his way up the stairs as he was hurrying down. Sean and Christian had been friends as well as partners for many years, and it still took Christian several seconds to recognize this disheveled filthy mess as his friend. "What in God's name happened to you?" He asked in shock.

"I must be a fright I am sure," his brilliantly white teeth shining through the grime on his face, "I have been on assignment."

"I gathered as much. So, out with it."

Sean gave Samantha a wary look and shook his head, "Not here."

Sean's look reminded him they were not alone, "Understandable, I shall seek you out when I finish with my uncle. Will you be here?"

"I doubt I will be allowed to be anywhere else for days." Sean continued his descent upon those last cryptic words, leaving a puzzled Christian staring after him. Shaking his head, he continued up the stairs.

When they reached the upper hallway, he knocked lightly on the door then poked his head into the room, "Might I have a word with you Uncle?"

Aaron Bradford was staring pensively out the window, he turned when he heard his nephew's voice. "But of course, come in, come in. Your timing is impeccable as always, there is something we must discuss ..." His words trailed off when he noticed Christian was not alone. His eyes narrowed as he studied the vaguely familiar face as his mind grappled with trying to make the connection.

"Good morning Sir Aaron," Samantha said as she bobbed a curtsy.

The older man's eyes widened in recognition, "Sammy is that you?" When she nodded, a smile spread over his face as he opened his arms to embrace her. She willingly stepped into the hug and took all the comfort it offered.

Christian's eyes darted between Samantha and his uncle. With true amazement he said, "Obviously the two of you know each

other.”

Aaron chuckled, “I have known Sammy since before she was born, her brothers too for that matter.” He released the girl and took a good look at her and his smile faded, “Sweetheart, what has happened?”

Unable to help herself, her eyes welled with tears but she managed to stammer through her quivering lips, “Father is dead.”

Aaron immediately pulled her back into his arms and held her as gut wrenching sobs raked her body. He looked over her head at Christian who was staring at Samantha in shock over her display of emotion. Looks like her iron will was just a façade and it had crumbled before his very eyes. He found his heart aching for the grief stricken girl. Christian’s eyes met his uncle’s questioning ones, “I found her last night near the river. Some men killed her father and two mistreated her rather sorely. We retrieved Mr. Prichard’s body and I am going to accompany it and Miss Prichard to her grandparent’s house so he can be properly laid to rest.”

Aaron could tell there was more, but his nephew was reluctant to speak in front of Samantha. When her sobs had quieted down, Aaron stopped stroking her hair and told her, “There is a room down the hall and to your left where you can go and freshen up. There should be a pitcher with fresh water and a clean basin, if there is not, ask any of the men and they would be happy to get it for you.” He kissed the top of her head and gave her one last reassuring squeeze. She gave him a weak smile and left the room, glad to get away. Her unexpected show of emotion in front of Christian had embarrassed her terribly, and she needed a few moments of solitude to compose herself.

When the sound of her footstep receded, Aaron settled himself behind his desk, looked at his nephew and soberly said, “Now son, I want details and leave out nothing.”

“As like the past several nights, I was at Magee’s on that sniveling Davidson’s faulty tip, which by the way holds not a lick of merit. That is unless now we give credence to the ramblings of drunkards. Unless these men have access to unlimited finances, I can safely say the Archbishop, as well as the American president and the pasha of Tripoli are, in fact, quite safe.” Aaron chuckled at Christian’s putout expression then gestured for him to continue.

“‘Twas early, say half and ten, when I left the pub. That is when I came across Miss Prichard being manhandled by two ruffians. I made short work of them and tossed them in the burn. Knowing I could not leave the chit lying unconscious in the street, I brought her to the townhouse. Hugh patched her up, and when she awoke, she told us their carriage had been accosted by thieves who had a fierce argument with her father before killing him. She begged we retrieve his body, so I obliged.

“When we arrived at the body, I noticed it had been thoroughly searched, but all his possessions of any worth were still on his person. When I asked Miss Prichard if she had heard any bit of the argument, she said they kept asking both her father and her ‘Where is it?’ She heard her father tell them that they would never find it, and she swears she has no idea what ‘it’ is. We collected Mr. Prichard and went back to the town home, but obviously the situation did not sit well in my gut, hence my visit to you this dreary Tuesday morn Uncle.

“Now Sir, it is my turn to ask the questions. I am sure I can venture a guess, but I would rather hear from you. Who exactly is Nathaniel Prichard and how is it you are so close with his daughter that she turns to you for comfort?”

Aaron raised an eyebrow at his nephew’s insolence, this young pup was entirely too big for his britches. Nevertheless, with a heavy exhale he enlightened the young man, “Nathaniel and I go back to our days in secondary school and the academy. We lost touch for a few years, only to reunite on a mission. I was on assignment, firmly ensconced with a group who was passing information from the Committee of Secret Correspondence to the Royalists. Word had come of an informant from the Americas who had arrived with information vital to the cause. Three of us were sent to meet the man, or as it turned out, men, an American named Arnold, an officer, Charles Hastings I recognized from a previous mission and Nathaniel.

“They must have been briefed of my role, for they did not even bat an eye when I walked in. On the other hand, my heart was pounding and all sorts of doubts were running through my mind. Had these men actually deserted? Would they uncover me, for surely if they did, I would be headed to the guillotine before nightfall? Through the grace of God alone, I managed not to give myself away.

“Nathaniel greeted us in flawless French, introduced Monsieurs Arnold and Hastings, then proceeded to tell us they have uncovered the British plan for taking Rhode Island. He explained the

American's counter strategy, and the need they had from their French supporters. There was enough truth in the details he gave, yet enough blatant discrepancies from the actual mission that I knew they were leading the Franco-American coalition on a merry chase." Aaron chuckled, "At that moment I think I breathed for the first time since I had entered the room. We swore to them their message would be delivered to the appropriate parties, thanked them and bade them adieu.

"We shook hands with each of the gentlemen as we left, Nathaniel squeezed mine just a little harder and I noticed a twinkle in his eye. It was not until then, I truly knew I was safe. Let me tell you my good boy, that one event matured me faster than any other experience. I was brash and brazen, my success in the field made me feel untouchable, even indestructible, but the moment I walked into that room I was smacked in the face with my very real mortality. For all it would have taken was a casual comment, a 'you look familiar', would have assured I would not have been seeing another sunrise." He trailed off, lost in his ponderings.

"Sage advice Uncle, which I assure you I shall take to heart, but this haunting tale leads me no closer to knowing how all this ties into the current situation I find myself in."

"Insolent pup," Aaron clucked. "Over the years Nathaniel and I were paired up on several missions. I stood witness at his wedding, paced with him during the births of his children and consoled him when his beloved Colleen passed away. I considered Nathaniel Prichard as much a brother as I do your father, and it pains me he is no longer with us."

"Might you have a clue what they were looking for when they killed him?" Christian questioned.

A shadow crossed over Aaron's face. He sighed and said, "I am afraid I just might." The younger man waited patiently for his uncle to elaborate. "As you well know, amongst the French émigrés who now don our fair country, there are many formerly prominent aristocrats, aristocrats whose focus is to rebuild France's prior regime, and to the demise of Napoleon. A complete network of contacts was compiled which includes their current identities and how they can be reached. There are three copies of the list, Nathaniel was in possession of one, I of another and the final copy is with our lead French contact, Jean Pierre de la Rues. I would stake my life that is what they were searching for, how the knowledge of its existence came to be in the

wrong hands is the true question here.”

Christian let out a loud hiss through his teeth, raked his hands through his hair, and mumbled almost inaudibly, “Take care in what you wish for.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing, I was just feeling restless last night when nothing had panned out from the lead. Obviously this situation is quite grave and since the men were unsuccessful in obtaining their goal with Mr. Prichard, you have to know that both yours and Monsieur de la Rues’ lives very well may be in jeopardy.”

“Fret not for my safety, nor that of Jean Pierre’s. Unlike Nathaniel, our current status has us fairly well surrounded by operatives at all times. I can deal with matters on this front if I know you will look after Samantha’s wellbeing.”

“Of course, for that you need not worry,” Christian assured. “She has requested her father’s remains be brought back home for burial next to her mother’s, I had already resigned myself to accompany her on her journey. That is what I was coming to inform you this morning. Now on another matter, what has this place in such a tizzy this morning?”

Christian asked his question just as a now composed Samantha reentered the office, so Aaron replied, “I will let Sean fill you in. Why not go and find him? It will give Samantha and me a chance to talk.”

Christian nodded his acquiescence and left them.

Christian found Sean sitting at a table in one of the many training rooms eating ravenously. He had bathed, shaved and changed his clothes, other than being slightly thinner and skin bronzed, he looked like his old self. "Greetings my friend," Christian announced cheerfully.

"And to you," he replied. "Come, sit, we have much to discuss."

"I have not seen you since my father's wedding, where have you been hiding yourself all summer?"

"Cadiz," he answered around a mouthful of food.

Christian raised an eyebrow and let out a low whistle, "I pray your Spanish is as fluent as your French my friend."

"Pero por supuesto mi amigo, pero por supuesto," but of course my friend, but of course, he replied with a dialect which truly impressed.

With a feeling of trepidation, but still needing to know, he asked, "So what has you so distressed and this entire building in an uproar?"

"Make yourself comfortable my friend, for the story is long and the path quite rocky." Sean finished his meal as Christian settled himself. "After your father's wedding, while you were chasing ghosts around Stonehenge," Christian gave him a snort at the reference to one of the many wild goose chases he had been on over the past few months. "I was entrenched with a group of fishermen. There is a job I would not wish even on my worst enemy, hours on end, doing backbreaking work, and sometimes all for naught. For the first few weeks, my hands would bleed daily, every muscle in my body would scream and I would collapse in my bed every night from sheer exhaustion, only to wake at a godforsaken hour the next day and do it

all again. However, the subterfuge enabled me to blend in with members of both the Spanish and French navies.

“The men spent evenings in a local cantina, drinking anis and carousing. When I was finally accepted in their group, they spoke freely in front of me. Most of the information that passed was strategies of which we were already well aware. However, several days ago, they spoke of how Napoleon was going to out-fox the dim-witted English. He was going to make it as though he had some of our Mediterranean holding in his sights, and while we were otherwise preoccupied in the south, he would launch his invasion against the motherland.

“Lieutenant Pilfold and the Ajax are due into Plymouth on the morrow to restock. I will be heading out with them within the next day or so to meet up with Nelson on the Victory to tell him of the plan. Crux of it is, Captain Orde on the Cambridge is floating but a few miles off Cadiz, but I could not jeopardize my cover nor expose their presence by going directly to them.”

Christian leaned back in his chair and studied his friend, turning over the ramifications in his head. Finally he spoke, “Your information could very well turn the tide of this war, you will be knighted for sure.”

“I could give a rat’s arse about that, and you know it. My only concern is stopping this madman. For as long as I have a breath in me, I will do whatever it takes to ensure Napoleon never steps foot on British soil.”

Christian smiled at Sean’s impassioned speech, the world would be hard pressed to find a man more patriotic than he. “I wish you God’s speed my friend. I know you will be successful and you will be back here crowing to us about it before year’s end.”

Sean gave him a lopsided grin, “From your lips to God’s ears my friend. Now, who was that lass you had with you?”

Christian chuckled and shook his head, “Looks as though I have landed myself into a fine kettle of fish this time. It all started last night...”



When Christian left the room, Aaron walked over to Samantha and gave her another comforting hug then led her to a chair, "Come, sit child, so we may talk." She gave him a watery smile as she settled herself. Aaron assessed her for a moment before he spoke. She was the spitting image of Colleen with the exception of her hypnotic golden eyes, those she inherited from her father, but the flowing blonde hair, the delicate bone structure, the high cheekbones and slightly upturned nose were all her mother. She even possessed the effortless grace Colleen had. Breaking his silence, he said, "You are as beautiful as your mother was, 'tis like looking back in time, you resemble her so."

"Except for my cat-eyes," she chuckled. "You have always said that Sir Aaron."

"Old people tend to repeat themselves."

"If you are old, than I am to be crowned the next queen of England."

"Best not say that too loudly, the Prince is still unattached."

"Perish the thought!" She exclaimed and rolled her eyes.

Aaron let out a guffaw. "Sassy as ever I see." He sobered, hating to dim the new light in her eyes, but he needed to ask, "You knew?"

She nodded.

"But he would not listen, would he?"

Tears filled her eyes again as she looked at him shaking her head. Taking a steadying breath she asked, "What is the sense of knowing when you cannot protect the people you love the most? 'Tis a damned curse."

“There have been many times when you were able to cheat fate and change the course of events. I doubt if any of those whose lives had been saved would agree with you. Nathaniel was strong willed, and if knowing the outcome he still proceeded, he had good cause. Do not fault yourself. Do you know what they were looking for?”

She nodded, “Not last night, but I know now.”

“Do you know where it is?”

She shook her head.

“I do not need to explain how sensitive the situation is, countless lives are in danger until it is recovered and safely sealed away from prying eyes.”

“I know. When father has been laid to rest, my focus will be to recover the list.”

“I shall send a man ahead to secure passage for you, then to bring word to my brother Graydon. He will inform Patrick what has happened so they can meet you at your Grandparent’s estate.” She nodded and he continued, “I want you to work with Christian.” Samantha bristled and Aaron smiled, “He can be a bit highhanded at times, but my nephew is a good man. You can trust him, I would trust him with my life.”

Samantha eyed him warily but then acquiesced, “With such a vote of confidence, I would be a fool to refuse.”

“You may want to keep your...gift to yourself for now. My nephew is a skeptical man and he will think you are daft if you come right out and admit it, but he is also shrewd. In time, he will probably figure it out on his own. When he does, he will accept it without question.”

“There are a few who know, it is not something I bring up in casual conversation.”

“I know my dear. I just thought a little insight into what makes Christian tick would be beneficial.”

There was a light knock on the door and Christian entered, “We should be on our way.”

Samantha and Aaron rose. She hugged him fiercely and said, "Thank you for everything. My father was proud to call you friend, and I share his conviction."

He kissed her forehead and looked at Christian, "You take care of this one, boy."

"I will guard her with my life Uncle."

"I know you will." He gave Samantha one last hug and said, "Remember what I told you. I expect word as soon as you have things in hand."

Thinking his uncle was speaking to him, Christian replied, "You have my word."

Samantha and Aaron exchanged knowing glances and then the two younger people left on their journey. Still standing Aaron took in the now silent room then mutter aloud, "You are in for the adventure of your life my dear boy, and you do not even know it yet."

They had traveled for an hour when the weather turned from bad to worse. Samantha begged Christian to allow one of the men to ride within the carriage with them, for she saw no point in both freezing. “This way they can alternate. One can warm himself while the other drives. In the long run, we will be able to cover more ground and not tax your men overly.”

“I was thinking the same, but I did not know how you would react to the company of a stable hand in your carriage.”

“You have a mighty low opinion of me m’lord,” she chided.

Christian banged on the roof signaling Murphy to stop. When the carriage came to a halt and he went to climb out, the wind ripped the door from his hands and slammed forcefully. Moments later, he returned with Conrad in tow. “We will switch off every hour,” he told Samantha when he had settled in the seat across from her and Christian. “Twas very kind of you to suggest.”

She gave the man a warm smile, “Think nothing of it my good man.” Samantha had not bargained for having to sit so intimately near Christian when she had made her suggestion and she was now eyeing him speculatively. He merely raised an eyebrow at her, shimmied his shoulders into a more comfortable position in the corner, and closed his eyes. She would have thought he was unaware of her discomfort if it were not for the smirk which played upon his lips. Determined to take the high road, she reached under her seat and retrieved a spare blanket. Handing it to Conrad she said, “Warm yourself while you can, for I fear your hour’s long respite will pass far too quickly.”

He thanked her again, wrapped himself in the proffered blanket, curled up, and promptly went to sleep. How she wished she could do the same. No matter how tired she was, she could never relax enough in a moving carriage to drift off, she never felt safe.

Instead, she now glanced out the window at the rain swept landscape passing by, melancholy overtook her. She dreaded telling her brothers they all were now orphans. A single tear slid silently down her cheek and the scenery blurred.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt, jostling Samantha awake. She lazily looked around, not knowing where she was. She was lying against something hard but warm, and felt completely secure, the urge to close her eyes again and forget the world was very strong. Realization hit her like a bolt of lightning and she sat upright, then glanced through the waning light at the man sitting next to her as he let out a lazy grin. She had actually fallen asleep and while she was sleeping she must have snuggled against Christian. Her face blazed crimson as he drawled, "Think nothing of it, you were exhausted. 'Twas my pleasure."

Flabbergasted, she diverted her eyes to her lap, not trusting her voice. She heard the man across from her clear his throat and she was startled to see it was Murphy now who was sitting across from her. Sheepishly he replied, "We must've reached Hereford County. 'Tis getting dark and we will be spending the night at the inn. Would ye like me to go in m'lord and announce yer arrival?"

"Yes, Murphy, thank you. Try and find a sheltered area for the carriage, be as discrete as possible with our ... cargo, for I am sure if someone were to find out what we were carrying, we would be sent packing," he said in an ominous tone. "When you are done, gather our bags, then you and Conrad should join us for supper." Murphy nodded and left.

As the silence stretched within the confines of the carriage, Christian could sense Samantha's embarrassment over her unconscious display. He tried to ease her discomfort by changing her train of thought. "How is your wrist feeling?"

She was surprised at the true concern she heard in his voice, she frowned at her wrapped arm before she looked at him, "Truthfully it is not bothering me overly much, and I think the swelling is starting to subside."

"I am glad, maybe it is not broken after all."

She actually smiled at him, "We can hope."

Her smile was barely discernible in the failing light, but it

was no less potent. He had seen her smile at Hugh, but it had never been directed at him, and he was startled by the effect it had on him. In a voice more gruff than he intended he said, "Our rooms should be ready by now. We should head in before the rain starts in earnest again." He rose and headed out the door. When his feet hit the ground, he turned to assist her. He clasped her around the waist and effortlessly lowered her feet to the ground.

The action, which should have been inconsequential, caused Samantha's breath to catch at the unfamiliar tingling in her breasts from where they had brushed against his chest. She could not have felt the heat and strength of his hands on her hips any more than if he had branded them into her flesh. She swayed slightly. Christian grabbed her elbow to support her, turned and headed toward the inn at a hurried walk, pulling her along with him. They burst through the door of the inn, shaking the rain from their bodies. Samantha was slightly winded, but she doubted it had anything to do with their brief sprint for shelter. *Get a hold of yourself old girl, your weary mind is having your body play tricks on you.* She took a breath to steady herself. She needed food and sleep, she told herself.

Christian was speaking with the innkeeper, so Samantha used the time to look around. The room to her right was massive. There was a fire blazing in each of the four hearths, above each mantle hung a coat of arms. There were several rugs strewn over the stone floor with a hodgepodge of chairs and settees encircling them. Ancient tapestries adorned the walls, although time had faded them, they were no less magnificent.

Samantha closed her eyes. She could picture the room as it was once used. She could see the mighty knights, who had just returned from battle, sitting at the long tables, eating and discussing their victory. She could hear the minstrels playing and the songs being sung of the bravery of their great liege and the beauty of his fair lady, who were sitting upon the dais surveying the room and their many vassals. She could smell the sweet meats and the spiced wine.

She did not open her eyes when she heard Christian's deep baritone voice in her ear, "This room draws me in whenever I am here. 'Tis almost like I have stepped back into time when I come in this room. The past is so strong I can feel it."

She turned toward him and looked into the smoky gray eyes of the man who had just read her thoughts so accurately. "It takes your breath away," she said in a husky voice she barely recognized as

her own.

For a moment, he stared into her golden eyes and his darkened. Desperately needing to break the spell, he abruptly turned to look at the room, he explained, "The owner went to great lengths restoring this inn to its previous glory. At one time, this had been his ancestral home, but it had been overrun during a siege and lost to his family. As fate would have it, he was allotted the opportunity to reclaim his family home, and he and his wife have spent the past fifteen years restoring it.

"The cost of such was quite tremendous, so in order to defray some of it, he resigned himself to making it into an inn instead of a private residence. Now he and his wife could not be happier in their decision." He finally looked at her as he said smiling, "Just short of straw pallets to sleep on, I think you will find everything quite authentic."

She stared quizzically at him for a long moment before she asked, "And why is it you know so much of the history of this manor?"

He gave her an impish grin, "Because my aunt and her husband are the owners." She laughed and his stomach clenched. He was not given any time to analyze his reaction, for her face, which was smiling, and animated just seconds ago was now frowning. He raised an eyebrow at her sudden change of mood and she asked, "If this is your family's home, why were you concerned over my father?"

He quickly took her elbow and led her to the hearth. Glancing over his shoulder to make sure they could not be overheard, he whispered, "I know you will not think me daft, for I know you felt the power in this room just as I do. Although my aunt would never admit it, the spirits of her husband's ancestors are still very much a part of this house, and if she were to find out that we..."

"We had the body of someone who had yet to be laid properly to rest she would be harried to say the least," she finished.

"Exactly." He wondered why he was not surprised at her instant understanding, and even more so, at the ease he was able to tell her his belief in something that would cause others to shun and mock him. Seeing her comprehension, he also knew he did not need to tell her to be extremely circumspect when discussing the circumstances behind this trip.

His thoughts were interrupted when a lovely older woman floated into the room, "Christian my dear, it is so good to see you!" Her smile was bright and her eyes danced with sheer joy at the sight of her nephew. Christian obviously mirrored the adoration, "Aunt Tess," was all he had time to say before he was engulfed in a ferocious hug which he returned with as much feeling if not as much force.

His Aunt Theresa was tall and graceful with willowy arms, sparkling blue eyes and raven black hair, which only recently started showing gray. She had a truly regal air about her but she was not unapproachable, for her love and kindheartedness shone through stronger than any of her other traits. Supposedly, she was the spitting image of her younger sister, Christian's mother, in looks but not manner.

Where Theresa is warm and loving, Krista was cold and aloof. Where Theresa was convivial, Krista was a shrew, or at least so Christian had been told. His mother had died while birthing him, so he had never known her. However, from the stories told to him by his Uncle Aaron and Aunt Suzanne and then grudgingly reaffirmed by Aunt Theresa herself, he knew he was far better off not knowing her.

They told him of the torment she had put his father through, yet Graydon never said a disparaging word about her to Christian. He had only learned the truth when he was an adolescent. He had been staying here at the manor, as he often did when he was younger, and he was feeling very sorry for himself. He had carried around the guilt that he was the cause of his mother's death when Theresa had set him straight about his mother's true character.

Although it pained her to speak ill of her dead sister, she told him about the blatant way she had seduced his father, then forced him to marry her, even against the wishes of their parents. Then she told him what a shrew she had become, how cruel she had become towards him, driving him away. She told him he was not missing anything by his mother's death. In fact, he was probably more blessed because he was showered by the love of his Aunt Suzanne and herself as well as his father and uncle, a love she sorely doubted his mother would have been capable of giving.

When Christian released his aunt, she cradled his face in her hands. Smiling she said, "You get more handsome every time I see you, which is not nearly often enough."

Artfully dodging her reprimand, he introduced her to their



guest, "Aunt Tess, may I present Miss Samantha Prichard. I am accompanying her to her brothers' estate in Kilkenny."

The older woman worried her brow, "Prichard ... Prichard, you are not by any chance Colleen and Nathaniel's daughter, are you?"

Startled Samantha looked at their hostess wide-eyed, then glanced at Christian for support but not finding any in his baffled expression, "Yes madam, the very same," she affirmed.

Theresa beamed, "Lovely couple your parents, though I have not seen them in years. Do tell child, how are they?"

A shadow passed over Samantha's lovely face, she cleared her throat, "My mother has passed four years ago this January coming. She fell outside our home and hit her head, we do not know how long she lay there in the snow and freezing cold before my father found her. She never woke. My father passed just this week, he was never quite the same without his beloved Colleen. At least now they have been reunited and can be happy again."

"Oh you poor child," Theresa cried as tears filled her eyes and she immediately embraced Samantha, not giving one whit she had just met the girl. "You have someone to care for you my dear?"

Samantha nodded fighting her own tears, "I am returning to my grandparents' home. Two of my brothers live there, they will see to my needs. I thank you for your concern madam."

"No one else? No female family member for you to consult with?"

"My eldest brother's wife Arianna, she is the sister I never had. We are very close."

"Good, good, at least you have that. My heart still breaks for you child. Losing both your parents so young, I know what it is like. I was about your age when my parents passed and being the oldest it was my duty to see to the welfare of my younger siblings." The memory caused the pain of the long ago time to reflect vividly upon her face, but in a blink it was gone, making Samantha think she had imagined it.

The woman gave her one more brief hug, and she was taken

aback by the kindness of this stranger. She knew they shared an affinity and she would very much like to continue their budding friendship, although she doubted they ever would. Again her thoughts were echoed with Theresa's very next words, "We are kindred spirits my dear. If you every find yourself in these parts again, please know you will always be welcome in my home."

"I would like that very much," Samantha smiled and truly meant it.

Silently Christian watched the exchange between the two women, one old and seasoned, the other young and unworldly, yet somehow they were as his aunt had said, kindred spirits. He knew, without a doubt, his and Samantha's paths would cross again after his mission was completed, if only for the bond between his aunt and her.

With the exception of her understandable breakdown in his uncle's office, he was coming to appreciate the gentile strength this woman possessed. The horror she had witnessed, her father being killed before her eyes, followed by the treachery which befell her, she handled with stern determination and an all too logical resolve which belied her fragile appearance. Very few would be able to handle her current situation with such aplomb, a trait he found deeply admirable.

His aunt broke into his appraisal, "The two of you should get freshened up from your long journey and I will see to getting you some supper. Did only Murphy travel with you this time or did Conrad come too?"

"They both came this time madam."

"Very good, they know their way to the kitchen. I shall have something hot and hardy for them there as well. Will half an hour give you enough time?" Christian glanced at Samantha and she nodded. "Good, good, be a dear and show her to her room, then I will expect the two of you in the dining room at five."

Theresa floated out of the room in the same manner as she had entered and Samantha smiled after her. "She is an enchanting woman."

"The most kindhearted soul I have ever had the pleasure of knowing," he agreed. Then, placing a hand on the small of her back he said, "Shall we?"

A feeling of déjà vu overcame her but she shook it off, smiled lightly and allowed him to lead her from the room and up the two flights of stairs to their sleeping chambers.

They stopped in front of one of the heavy wooden doors. He pushed it open for her and gave a mocking bow, which made her giggle, "Your room madam. Mine is right next door, so if you should need anything, do not hesitate. I shall fetch you a few minutes before we are due downstairs and show you the way." He flashed her a dazzling smile, turned on his heels and disappeared into his own chambers.

She stared after him blinking. She did not quite know how to handle the charming side of Christian, he was much easier to characterize as an overbearing oaf. She walked into her room, quietly closed the door behind her, and looked around.

The only way to describe it was breathtaking. An enormous four-poster bed dominated the far wall, each post was draped in flowing material. The blankets were not quilts like the ones on her own bed, but fur as they had used hundreds of years ago. In the adjoining wall was the hearth, large enough for a full grown man to stand upright, which now contained a roaring fire, in front of it, two tall wing-backed chairs upholstered in red velvet. She let out a small gasp when it registered what the unusual shapes lying on and around a small table in the corner were, and she walked over to them.

Upon it lay a helm, next to the headpiece, neatly folded were braies, hose, garters and a tunic, and lying the full length of the table was a mighty sword. It was sheathed so all that showed was the hilt, but upon the hilt was the hand-carved head of a wolf with some type of gray stones for eyes. On the shelf beneath the tabletop lay a pair of gauntlets, and finally beneath the shelf were a pair of boots, polished and waiting for their master to return. It was not hard to imagine the mighty knight to whom these had once belonged. From the size of the clothing, she could tell he was tall, well over six foot, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. Fancifully she added long brown hair and brooding gray eyes before she shook herself from her daydream.

*This will never do. Christian will be knocking on the door at any moment and you have yet to get started. Maybe this place truly is bewitched.* Quickly she poured water from the pitcher into the basin. She managed to unbutton only a few buttons on her gown, but it was enough for her to be able to wash her face and neck. She could truly use Isabel's help.

She was struggling to refasten the buttons when the knock came. In her exasperation she yelled, "Come!"

Christian could not help but chuckle at her plight, without reservation, he walked over to where she was sitting in front of the dressing mirror. Gently he swatted her hand away and laughed again at her frustrated sigh. Their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror, his dancing with mirth, hers disgruntled, "I will ask Aunt Tess if she could have someone help you tonight. Sorry, I did not think."

She blew out a long breath making the wispy hair on her forehead flutter, "'Tis not your fault." She continued to stare at him in the mirror, now with a more rueful expression.

"Is something amiss?" He asked. She bit the edge of her lower lip. He could see her apprehension in asking him, "What is it? You only need to ask." He coaxed.

She gave him the look of a child who had done something terribly wrong and now needed to confess to her father. He raised an eyebrow and started to smirk when she blurted, "In my haste to wash, I got my dressing wet and I know I will not be able to change it on my own." She looked at him with pleading eyes and he knew how much it cost her to ask for help, which he would willingly give, for anything except that.

For a moment, she thought he would deny her. His expression had changed ever so slightly then was immediately shuttered. "Of course," he said and abruptly turned to fetch the bandages from the bag Isabel packed for her. He took his time, gathering his nerve along with the bandages. She turned and watched him rummage. When he finally thought he was composed enough so she would not notice his despair, he returned to her. "I confess, I really have no idea how to do this."

"I watched Hugh, I should be able to talk you through it. First, we need to get the wet dressing off. Have you a knife?" At his raised eyebrows she added, "To cut through the knot so we can unwrap it." He produced the knife he kept strapped to his leg and if she questioned its hiding place, she did not voice it. Deftly he sliced apart the two knots holding the splint together and replaced his knife. He began the unwrapping, and try as he might, he could not keep his hands from shaking. By the time he reached the bark, he was starting to perspire, and as each swipe of the final layer exposed more and more skin, he started to pale.

Samantha's heart went out to him. She placed her other hand on his cheek and gently nudged his face to meet hers. Sensing what he needed to hear she whispered, "You are not hurting me, in fact you are far gentler than Hugh was. You are doing fine."

He took a few ragged breaths and the pained look started to fade from his eyes only to be replaced with self-recrimination, "You must think me a fool."

He started to look away but she nudged his gaze back to hers, "A few summers ago I was walking near my home when some rustling in a briar drew my attention. Ensnarled was a baby hare. I know 'twas just a wild creature, but my heart broke for him. He was so tiny and he was cut and bleeding, so I scooped him up and carried him back to the stables. I could feel his heart beating wildly beneath my palms. To him I must have seemed a monster, for I was so large in comparison, and truth be told, I worried, because he was so small, I would do him more harm than good.

"I cried the entire time I tended to him, silently praying for God's help to heal the poor animal. I felt clumsy and inept, but within a few days he was strong enough to let him run around the yard, and within a fortnight he returned to the wild." He felt her eyes look straight into his soul, eyes which showed compassion and understanding and not a hint of criticism. "You have not hurt me, and I know you will not. It may get a little uncomfortable, but I am not that tiny hare."

He laid his hand over the one on his cheek, turned his face and kissed her palm sweetly. Huskily he said, "Thank you. All my life I have been embarrassed by this shortcoming, by this incomprehensible fear. I have been teased and ridiculed, even by those who love me, yet you, a virtual stranger, have accepted my malady and not passed judgment and have even given me cause to try and overcome it."

"You have nothing to overcome, and I could hardly call your empathy for someone who is injured a malady."

Christian's hands still shook slightly as he rewrapped her arm, but he was definitely feeling less ill while doing so. When the final knot was tied, he looked up at her warily and she smiled, "I apologize for putting you through such torment."

"Like you, I am not a fragile rabbit, I shall live. Now we are

rather late for supper and if you do not want to see that gentile creature you met earlier turn into a banshee, I suggest we make haste.”

She laughed at his outrageous comment as she rose from her seat, then she made an audible gasp. Worried Christian stared at her only to realize she was not looking at him, but over his shoulder. Alarmed he turned quickly to see what had caused her such duress. She was agape staring wide-eyed at a portrait, which hung on the far wall. It was of a great Knight sitting astride his destrier. He was in full armor, less his helm, which he held under his arm. His nearly black hair matched the coloring of his mighty war-horse. His viral male beauty could not be denied with his chiseled features, proud square jaw, patrician nose and sensual mouth, but it was the stormy gray eyes which caught Samantha’s stare.

In the background stood an army of faceless knights, one carrying his colors, black and gold with the emblem of a wolf’s head, a wolf with stormy gray eyes. He was the exact image of the man she pictured in her daydream, the exact image of Christian. She turned questioning eyes on Christian and he smiled at her bewilderment, “He is my, I am not exactly sure how many greats ago, grandfather. He was a mighty warlord, one of William the Conqueror’s most trusted vassals. It was he who seized this estate from Uncle Albert’s family.”

“The resemblance is startling.”

“So I have been told. Actually I think my father looks more like Cedric than I.”

“If he was the cause of your uncle’s family’s woes why has he chosen to pay such homage to the man?”

“My uncle is more interested in preserving the history than holding a grudge. Like it or not, Cedric is part of his family history, a history which crossed again when his sister-by-law married a direct descendant of the man.”

She looked at him shrewdly, “Your father had something to do with your Uncle Albert getting this house back did he not?”

He smiled at her astuteness, “That is a story for the long carriage ride which awaits us tomorrow, right now my only interest is avoiding my aunt’s wrath. So if you would be so kind...” He bowed to her and extended his hand toward the door. She curtsied barely, able

to swallow her giggle, and headed out the door. Christian grinned behind her.

When they entered the dining room, Christian went directly to his surprisingly scowling aunt, kissed her cheek and whispered something in her ear. Samantha nearly laughed aloud at the incredulous look she gave him then tweaked his cheek before she smiled. She could not hold in the laugh when he turned back to her, his cheeks stained with his chagrin. For as large and menacing as he was, it was endearing to find he could still be made to blush. He gave her a fierce scowl, which only made her laugh more, he finally gave in and laughed at himself, for he knew there was no malice intended in her merriment.

Supper was a hearty affair with a succulent lamb stew and fresh baked dark bread, followed by filled spiced apples with clotted cream. Samantha ate so much she thought she would not be able to move for hours. “Madam that was the most delicious meal I have had since my mother’s passing. I am full to nearly bursting.”

“Nothing better to fortify you when the weather turns sour than a stew I always thought. It stays with you, keeps you warm.”

“Well it was truly wonderful and I thank you. Lord Albert, my compliments to you as well on this magnificent home. If I close my eyes, I can hear the minstrel’s tunes and the clashing of the tourney. How were you able to get so many original pieces to fill your home?”

Christian rolled his eyes, Samantha had no idea what she had inadvertently unleashed. He exchanged a knowing glance with his Aunt and the two of them settled back for what was to come. Albert was overjoyed at her interest and was more than happy to oblige her questions.

With a twinkle of sheer pleasure in his eyes he said, “Cedric of Bradford was fierce in battle but generous in heart. He was under the king’s command when he took my family’s estate, but he kept the bloodshed to a minimum, in fact not one man perished during the



siege. Although he was loyal to his liege, he did not always agree with his dictates. Cedric knew Drunwadick held no threat to the crown, but William was insistent, so he had to do his lord's bidding, but he did it in his own way.

"When his small army came to overtake Drunwadick it became blatantly obvious death and destruction were not in his plan. They burned down an insignificant out building, but not before he had made sure no one was inside. When the face-to-face confrontation started, it took only moments to realize the invading army was merely defending themselves and not fighting back. Bewildered, my ancestor realized this and halted his men. Ammon moved his horse to face Cedric's and in a bold or maybe foolish move, Cedric sheathed his sword.

"I wish not to spill the blood of you or yours, however the king orders I take this stronghold' he told him. 'I have a keep in the northlands, gather your belongings and your family, and go. Carrentan Keep will now be yours, and none need know what has transpired here this day.'

"Realizing his good fortune, for Ammon knew without the shadow of a doubt his men were no match for Cedric's seasoned knights, he hastily assembled his people and what meager belongings they could pack before day's light, and left Drunwadick supposedly forever.

"Cedric had all the items my family could not bring carefully stored, as if he knew that one day one of his descendants would enable one of Ammon's descendants to reclaim his ancestral home."

Samantha was in awe, "How did you ever find out such detail of the events which occurred over seven hundred years ago?"

"Stories had been passed down through both Christian's and my family. When I gained entry to the storeroom, which had been barred to all by Cedric's decree and upheld through the centuries, I uncovered not only my family's artifacts, but also several parchment journals, written in Cedric's own hand, detailing all which had transpired. His journals have also enabled me to bring Drunwadick back to what it was in its glory. He detailed every inch of this place as if he truly knew I would one day come to reclaim my home."

Samantha did not doubt he knew exactly that, there was too much here to be mere coincidence, "Cedric is smiling down upon you

now. You have righted the obvious grievance he felt he had bestowed upon your family. You have done him, and undoubtedly Ammon, proud.”

Albert flushed at her praise, “Many thanks sweet child.”

The remainder of the evening was spent as a history lesson. They wandered from room to room, Samantha asking pointed questions and Albert happily supplied the answers. Although Christian had heard the stories hundreds of times, he tagged along amicably. There were only two rooms occupied by other guests and they were gracious enough to allow them entry so as not to disrupt the tour.

Samantha was flabbergasted at the depth of knowledge Albert had on almost a thousand years of history. He could intelligently discuss everything from the hand-forged weapons to the intricate embroidery on the tapestries, to how the bailey and outer walls had once been laid out. She knew she would never be able to keep all the facts straight, but the ones she could remember, she would cherish.

She envied his ability to trace his lineage so far into the past, beyond her grandparents, her own lineage becomes a bit murky. Oh, the bloodline could be traced undeniably, ‘twas all the stories which were unobtainable. All four sets of her great-grandparents passed away when her grandparents were young, some during childbirth, one from an accident and the rest from one disease or another. Therefore, her grandparents were denied the knowledge of rich history from which they had come.

The last leg of their tour was the bedrooms on the third floor, of which there were only four. These were the rooms reserved for the family, and were the only rooms where Albert deviated from Cedric’s journal. Each room had a heavy wood door with a black metal pull and brackets where, at one time, a board would have been laid barring any would be intruder, dark wide-planked wooden floors which were polished to a high shine, a river stone hearth and mantel, beautifully ornate and oversized furniture, and its own little piece of history.

The master’s chambers was dedicated to Ammon and his ancestors, paintings of various family members adorned the walls, a corner contained a hand carved chair made by Ammon’s middle son and upon it a quilt made by Deidre, Ammon’s wife. The next room was a smaller room dedicated to the children of Drunwadick, tiny

shoes were placed by the hearth as if to dry, a pint sized tunic and a child's cloak hung from pegs on a wall and toys spanning the ages lay somberly unused upon shelves.

The room Christian was using held the history of Deidre's heritage. Like the master's chambers, paintings hung on the walls, but these were mostly of scenery, all painted by Deidre's or her eldest daughter. The room did contain one portrait. It was of another mighty lord, this one as fair as Cedric was dark. He was tall and broad with an arrogant set to his firm mouth and stubborn jaw. Penetrating gold eyes stared back at you, almost through you, knowing, missing nothing. Samantha knew those eyes all too well, as well as the face, it was her brother Patrick

She paled visibly and Christian, sensing her distress, was at her elbow instantly. He whispered for her ears only, "You look as though you have seen a ghost."

"I very well may have," she let out in a hushed gasp which trembled.

The pressure he had on her arm increased as she swayed slightly. "Tell me," he demanded, his face harsh from his concern. She started to shake her head. How could she possibly explain this to him? Would he even believe her? She looked into his eyes, searching for answers.

"Tell me." This time it was more of a plea than a command and she relented.

"That is Patrick," she said as she turned back toward the painting.

He furrowed his brow while he tried to think who Patrick was, then his eyes widened and he exclaimed, "Your brother?" in a voice that bounced off the stone walls. There was no accusation, no disbelief, just shock.

Albert observed the startled look on his nephew's face and the pale pallor of his guest's and asked, "What about your brother?" Still dumbfounded, all Samantha could do is point to the portrait, and Albert let out a low whistle. He digested the ramifications of what he was about to tell her, trying to formulate the best way, for what she needed to know would intertwine their lives irrecoverably.

“The man you are looking at was Deidre’s father. From all I have read, he was a brute and a womanizer, which makes it a strange irony that ultimately a woman caused his demise. The details are extremely vague but from what I kin, he had beaten a young maid for reasons unknown, leaving her for dead. A young knight took exception to the travesty and ran him through. That young knight was none other than Cedric and the maid was one of his sisters.

“What is unclear to me is if Cedric realized who Deidre was, would he have been so generous in sparing her home, or had he in fact known who she was and because of feelings of guilt, was he so kind? Cedric was young, and the journals he kept then were not as detailed as those from when he was older, and there is no reference to the incident in the later journals.”

Samantha hung on his every word and when he was finished, she asked hopefully, “Do you know any more about him? His lineage? His descendants?” This man could very well hold the answers to her own family history, one she thought she would never know.

Sensing her anticipation and hating to disappoint her, Albert replied, “Not at the moment, but there are a number of things I still need to go through in the storage room.” His eyes danced merrily at the new challenge, “‘Tis truly like a treasure hunt every time I venture in there, I never know what I shall come out with. I will see what I can find for you.”

“That would be very kind of you Sir, thank you.”

Still standing behind Samantha, Christian laid his hands on her shoulders and said gently, “You have had a long day, and tomorrow’s journey will not be much better. You really should get some rest.”

As if the hands upon her were siphons and his baritone words were the catalyst, all of her energy drained out of her. Suddenly she was tired, both physically and mentally. Feeling the gentle squeeze on her shoulders, she nodded her head. This time she did not have the strength to even bristle at his instruction.

Albert moved over to her and took her hand, “The boy is right. You go rest now and I will get started on finding your family. I doubt I will find anything before you leave, but as soon as I do, I shall send you word.” He smiled and lightly kissed her cheek. The gesture, although entirely too familiar for two who had just met, was strangely

comforting to Samantha, reminiscent of her father's nightly kiss goodnight. She felt tears well in her eyes but she blinked them away.

They followed Albert out of the room and turned toward hers. Christian reached past her and opened the door, then laying a hand on the small of her back, he gently propelled her into the room and closed the door behind him. "Before you get your shackles up, I just thought to help you with the buttons so as not to bother Aunt Tess. Does your arm need tending to as well?" Mutely she shook her head. He gave a silent sigh of relief.

Christian took a quick glance around the room, then led her to the bench in front of the dressing mirror and made her sit. He was not quite sure why he did it, but he started to remove the pins from her hair and laid them in a dish on the table before her. When he had removed the last one, allowing the cascade of honey colored hair to tumble haphazardly to her waist, he reached around her, snatched the brush from the table, and brushed her hair until it glistened. All Samantha could do was stare at his reflection, frozen by the image of him performing such an intimate act.

When he finished, he swept her hair over her shoulder sending shivers through her, then deftly undid the row of buttons down her back. With his task complete, he stooped down so his head was level with hers and he met her eyes in the mirror, "I will make sure someone is here to help you in the morning. Try and get some sleep." He rose and without another word, left the chamber, leaving Samantha staring sightlessly into the reflecting glass.

Why had his words saddened her so? Surely it was not appropriate for him to play handmaid, yet she liked the feel of him brushing her hair. She convinced herself exhaustion was addling her brain, so she slipped out of her gown and climbed beneath the covers. When she slept, she dreamt of a young knight defending his sister's honor and the anguish he felt taking his first life.

For Christian, sleep did not come so easily. He could still feel the silkiness of her hair in his hands, smell her sweet scent. For the most part, he did not even like the chit, always sneering at him, showing her claws. He knew he was lying to himself, for he had also seen her compassionate and understanding side and it stirred something in him. Not that he liked that truth either. This was just another mission. He had promised his uncle he would return her safely to her family, and find the list. That was all. When he had completed his assignment, he would bid her adieu and go about his

merry way. That reconciled in his head, he finally slept, although magical golden eyes haunted his dreams.

'Twas the dead of night when the tide was at its peak and the Ajax set sail from Plymouth. She was a fine ship, boasting seventy-four guns and new mast and riggings, a year and a half passed, she had just come from repairs at Chatham, now fully outfitted, spit-polished and shined. They had cleared the treacherous currents near Plymouth an hour ago, and they were traveling into the Atlantic at a good clip, their sails pregnant with the sturdy wind.

In a few days, the Arctic air would turn into a tropical breeze, but the knowledge did nothing to warm Sean as he stood on the bow, coat collar pulled tight, hat pulled low, hands balled into fists crammed in his pockets as he braced against the biting cold. He need not have been standing on deck, he had full rights to the sheltered officers' quarters below board, but a restless feeling of foreboding seemed to close in on him so he sought the clarity the harsh elements would hopefully bring.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the salty air, then felt a hand on his shoulder. Without turning he said, "All those years ago in Horsham, did you ever think we would be standing here together, barreling over hundreds of miles in an attempt to foil the plans of an evil villain?"

"I was just pondering the same, but you have come a long way from the scrawny runt with a big imagination. Michael could never get past having his baby brother shadowing his every step, but I always saw the 'something extra' in you, that quick wit and sharp mind, never missing a thing and forgetting nothing. Yes Sean, I have no trouble picturing you standing by my side fighting for our country."

John's praise warmed Sean to the core, a man he once idolized now saw him as an equal. He turned toward his friend, and leaning on the rail he said, "You have not done badly yourself John, Captaining your own ship."

"I am only Captain because Brown's on trial for his lapse in judgment last July," the Lieutenant admonished.

"'Lapse in judgment' my ear! Do you think Calder would let him slide for what he did? He bloody turned tail when Gardner engaged the enemy. Mark my words, Brown will not be returning to this ship or any damned other one for that matter. You will be manning this ship from now on."

John raised an eyebrow and chuckled, "Totally unbiased opinion you have," Sean snorted and John continued with a sigh as he looked out over the choppy water, "although I would have to agree. I admit, it did not sit well with me when Ajax followed Hero instead of backing up Lord Gardner. We lost a main yard that day as well as two good men, not to mention the sixteen wounded we had," he added reluctantly, "one of which was me."

Upon Sean's questioning expression, John elaborated, "We were hit by one blast which sent shards of wood flying. One projectile caught me square in my hind quarters," Sean started to chuckle, "I am still pulling splinters from my bum." He roared at John's admission, "Some friend you are, taking pleasure from my rather delicate misfortune." Sean was now doubled over holding his sides, laughing so hard tears had formed in his eyes as John pasted a pained expression on his face and rubbed his derrière.

When Sean had to slide down the wall, reduced to a puddle, mopping the tears from his eyes and gasping for air, John relented and laughed along with his friend. "A fine picture we paint, carrying on like school boys, my crew is bound to have great faith in me as we lead them into battle."

"Your crew adores you. They had no kin who I was, just a new officer on the ship, and they were quick to tell me what a fine sailor you are. You do not hold up in your quarters like Brown, if there is work to be done, you are right in the muck with the rest of the men. I was even told you personally tended to the injured when doc was incapacitated. You have earned their respect, and after seventeen years you damn well should have."

John raised an eyebrow and questioned, "And why is it you know exactly how long I have been in the service?"

The younger man sobered and looked directly into his eyes, "Because on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1788 I lost two of my heroes, one of which I



never got to see again.”

“Your brother was a good man and his death cut me to the bone, especially since he died for no valid reason. It took me three years to hunt down his killer, but vengeance only left a sour taste in my mouth, and in the end it could not bring Michael back.” John’s voice trailed off as he remembered the sequence of events unfold in his mind. John extended his hand to help Sean up off the deck. When he was standing he said to him, “Lord only knows what we will encounter over the next several days, so you should go get some rest while you can.”

“Aye Captain,” Sean said with a weak smile, “I shall meet up with you for mid-day meal.”

He nodded as Sean headed below deck, when the younger man disappeared from sight, John turned to look at the horizon, starboard was still black as pitch, but port was starting to lighten to gray. Another ugly day was unfolding, but at least the rain had stopped.

The next morning dawned as cold, grey and dreary as the last, but thankfully, the rain had stopped. After breaking their fast, Christian and Samantha said their good-byes to Tess and Albert, Albert promising to continue to investigate into Deidre's history and send word when he found something. Since it was not raining, both Conrad and Murphy opted to ride atop, leaving Samantha and Christian alone in the carriage.

Gone was the easy and amicable conversation they shared the night before, and a strained silence engulfed the tiny space they shared. All that could be heard was the repetitive clopping of the horses' hooves and the crunch of the wheels on the stone as they rode, each staring unseeing out the windows, both lost in thought. Finally Christian broke the silence, "We will be entering Carmarthen County shortly, the boat is moored in Wormshead and is due to leave at noon. How well do you fair on the water? St. Georges Channel is bound to be choppy after the weather we have been having."

"Takes me a bit to get my sea legs, but I have been in rough seas before and managed." She gave him a weak smile and admitted, "as long as I have some bread to nibble on to keep my stomach from pitching."

He smiled at her, "I will keep your secret...as long as you packed enough bread for the both of us." Samantha laughed and felt the tension start to melt away. She knew it cost him to make the admission, whether it was true or not, she was not sure, but she did know it was said to put her at ease. "Did Aunt Tess send someone to help you this morning?"

She shook her head, "No, she came up herself to play lady in waiting. I have grown very fond of your Aunt, your Uncle too for that matter."

"That is good considering it looks as if they may be related to

you.” Christian smiled at the wistful expression on her face, “You would like that, would you not?”

“My grandparents died before I could care about my heritage, and the topic rarely came up with my parents, all I have are my brothers and their knowledge, which I am sure, is as limited as mine. Both my parents have siblings, but we have never met, and as far as I can tell, there were never any correspondences between them either. It was as if we were living in our own little cocoon.”

“Your father was protecting them by severing the ties.”

“Oh my mind knows that, but it does not stop the heart from aching.”

“I will tell you what, I shall send word to Uncle Aaron for him to send Albert the history part of your father’s file. It lists all the pertinent pre-service information like parent’s names and origins, grandparents’ names and origins, siblings. In some cases it even has the same information on the spouse, which is if your father filled in the information after he was married.”

Samantha’s eyes twinkled, “My parents met at work.”

He closed his mouth when he realized he was agape and let out a low whistle, covering as best he could, he replied, “I have always thought there were woman working with us, but I never knew any. Well then, looks like Albert will have lots of information to work with.”

“‘Tis very kind of him to do this.”

Christian tsked, “Are you jesting? He lives for this kind of challenge. He would just as soon....” Christian’s voice trailed off when Samantha’s face went white as a sheet. He was about to ask her what was wrong when the carriage came to an abrupt stop, jostling them. Before Samantha could blink, he was out the door, slamming it behind him. Her heart started to race when she heard the shouting and bit back a cry thinking this could not be happening again. Cautiously she drew the curtain and peeked out the window.

From her vantage point she could see there were six men with horses who had stopped their carriage. Conrad was on the ground, obviously unconscious or worse, and Murphy and Christian were outnumbered three to one. One of the assailants jumped on

Christian's back and the carriage rocked viciously when he slammed the man into it, causing the crook to crumble to the ground. Murphy leaped at the two still astride knocking them from their mounts, then rolled as he hit the ground and jumped back on his feet. Murphy and Christian stood back to back and fought with such speed and skill, they made short work of the remaining five bandits.

Samantha heard the original attacker start to rise from his place by the carriage door, so with all her might, she kicked the door open crashing it into the man's head, sending him into unconsciousness. Christian and Murphy heard the noise and turned toward it. When they realized what must have happened, they smiled at her as she exited the carriage.

She briefly returned their smile and went to kneel by Conrad. Thankfully, he was still alive. He had a lump on the back of his head, which was oozing a small amount of blood. Samantha fumbled in her bag, cursing her clumsiness at only having the use of one hand, for a handkerchief so she could wipe up the blood, and some of the balm Hugh had packed to heal some of her own cuts.

"How is he fairin'?" Murphy called to her.

"He shall have a sore head for a few days, but he should be fine," she reassured as she rose and walked toward them. Christian had just dumped the man Samantha clobbered into a pile with the other five and Murphy was busy tying the chaps up in a circle around the base of an old oak tree. When, or in one case she could say if, they woke up, they would not be able to get away.

Murphy started explaining to her the intricate knots he was tying, saying if one bloke tried to escape, the knots would close tighter around the other five. He was quite happily chattering away, and Samantha was politely nodding though he had lost her after the first step of his demonstration when Christian saved her, "Give it a rest old man. You have got my head spinning and I know how to tie the bloody thing."

Murphy shot a glare at him then flushed when he saw the completely baffled expression on Samantha's face. "Beggin' your pardon Miss, I get carried away sometimes when I am explainin stuff."

She gave him a bright grin, "You are proud of the knowledge you have and you merely wished to teach it to someone who does not know. I would say that was admirable and nothing to be sorry for,"

then she giggled, “even though, truth be told, I still have not the foggiest notion of how to tie that thing. Loop it counter clockwise three times then slip something through somewhere, honestly I have issues when I need to lace my own boots.”

Both men did not believe her for a second, but they laughed in spite of it. The fact she could poke fun at herself to make someone else, and for all she knew a mere stable hand, feel better about himself, endeared her to Murphy forever. Samantha walked around the tree and stopped at the one man whom she feared would not survive the wait for the magistrate’s arrival, “He is one of the men who killed my father.”

“Thought he looked familiar, should have finished him off the other night.”

She turned doe eyes at Christian, “That was you by the Thames? But that man was...”

“Riffraff” he supplied. He decided if his uncle could trust her, so could he. He took a breath and said, “I was working a lead and had been in disguise at a local pub. I was fetching my horse when you screamed.”

She took a few moments to digest this bit of news. *Could the burly monster who threw my attackers into the burn really be this man? That man looked ruthless and cold. Well why not? Did you not just see the same man, albeit a cleaner version, make short work of six men?* She looked at him and said shakily, “Then I guess, although a bit belated, I owe you my thanks.”

Christian only shrugged his shoulder and crouched to check if the knots were secure on their captives. He did not want her thanks, in fact he felt embarrassed by it. Quite odd considering the only ones who could ever embarrass him were his family and Hugh. Rising he said, “These should hold fast until we get to Wormshead, then the authorities can deal with them. Stopping them here has undoubtedly bought us some time, but there are bound to be more attempts, so we must make haste. I will ride atop with Murphy. Would you keep watch over Conrad?”

Samantha nodded and watched as they placed Conrad into the carriage. Murphy exited the carriage first and climbed atop. When Christian finally extricated himself, Samantha made her attempt to scramble in, but he stopped her with a hand on her elbow. He waited

until she looked at him, “You knew,” was all he said as the smoky gray of his eyes turned dark as stone, the eyes she had seen in her vision but had mistaken for dead.

A lump formed in her throat as her heart slammed against her ribs and her stomach clenched. How could she explain she saw rage, the glint of a knife blade, then blood? The images swirled before her eyes so quickly she could barely register their meaning, until finally the images stopped on piercing grey eyes, Christian’s eyes, eyes so cold she thought she was looking into the eyes of a dead man. She shuddered at the memory, “‘Twas just a feeling ... ‘tis all.”

He studied her long and hard and when stone turned back to smoke he promised, “I will keep you safe,” *or die trying* she added in her own mind and it did not sit well. He squeezed her arm a little harder, “you need not fear.” She gave him a nod and climbed into the carriage. She was not about to tell him she feared for his safety, not her own.

Christian was not kidding when he said make haste, he was damn near pushing the horses into a full lather. Conrad started to wake a few minutes after they were moving. He groaned and raised his hands to his head. Samantha quickly knelt down by his side, no easy feat at the breakneck speed they were traveling, and whispered, "You took a fall and hit your head, but you will be fine." Samantha did not want to alarm the poor man in case he could not remember what had happened.

Hearing Samantha's voice, Conrad tried to rise but her gentle hand kept him in place, "No," she softly commanded, "I insist you rest until we get to the ship."

"But I did not fall, someone pulled me from me perch. You could be in danger."

Relieved he apparently had not lost his memory she consoled, "Hush now, 'twas just some thieves and Murphy and Master Bradford took care of the matter so you need not worry yourself none. Now lay back and rest, 'tis quite a bump you are sporting there, should be quite sore for a few days I am sure."

Conrad was feeling uneasy over the attention this fine lady was paying him, 'twas far below her station to be tending to a mere stable hand and he said as much, "You should not be fussing over me so, 'tis not proper."

She scoffed, "Have we any control as to how we are born? The hands of fate could have swung the other way and our roles could have easily been reversed. I should like to think if that were the case, and it was I who was hurt, you would show me the same courtesy. Would you not?" She took the flush in his cheeks as a yes and continued, "True I come from nobility but never in my life have I put on airs and I do not intend to start now. God put you on this earth the same way he put me here, neither one of us better than the other. If

we are equal in his eyes, surely I have no right to judge differently. So I will hear no more about it.”

Conrad smiled and obediently remained prone until the carriage stopped. Never in his life had he come across a woman like Samantha, he was truly humbled by her, yet he also had never felt so validated either. Although his head was aching something fierce, he never felt better.

The carriage shifted when Christian and Murphy disembarked, and as Samantha reached for the door to do the same, it opened for her. Christian gave her a hand out, then surprised her by climbing into the carriage himself. She shrugged, obviously he went in to check on Conrad, so she turned and walked toward the water. Although the biting wind stung her cheeks and eyes, the fresh salty air was a nice change after spending hours in the carriage. She pulled her cloak more securely around her and stared out at the fretful sea. The turbulent gray water reflected the equally threatening sky, as whitecaps dotted the ocean clear to the horizon.

There was one fine ship moored at the end of the pier, its crew bustling about replenishing its supplies for a long journey and unfortunately imminent battle. Samantha closed her eyes and said a silent prayer for the crew's safe return. Next in line were two small fishing boats, both unloading their meager catch from the night before. Finally, moored closest to her was another boat, considerably smaller than the war ship, albeit larger than the fishing boats. This one more than likely used to transport post and supplies and she was sure it was her passage home.

She let out a sigh, “At least I will not be smelling like a fish when I return home.” Color rose in her cheeks as she whirled around when she heard the husky chuckle behind her.

“Captain Morris’ boat is not luxurious, but you are right, you will not smell like a fish. Now, if you do not mind, I would like you to get below deck before too many people see you. You never know who is watching and I would rather get you aboard before the crew sees you.” She raised her eyebrow in question. “Having a woman on board is bad luck.”

“Of all the ludicrous....and how exactly do you think I got over here in the first place? I certainly did not fly!”

He raised his hands in a defensive gesture, “I am not saying I



believe it, but I happen to know this crew is quite superstitious and considering the other delicate matter we will be smuggling onboard... Now, I need to check in with the magistrate, and Murphy is seeing to our luggage and such.”

“Conrad?”

“I will be providing for a room for him for today and if needed tomorrow. I have already told him I do not want him traveling today.”

Samantha smiled, “And what did he have to say about that?”

“He grumbled something about I was even worse than the lady and stomped off to the boathouse.” He laughed, “I am afraid the man is not used to being coddled and does not quite know how to handle it.”

Without her even realizing, they had made their way onto the boat and he was now leading her down a narrow stairwell. They stopped in front of a cabin door when Christian turned her toward him and whispered, “Here is the cabin. Please stay in here until I come and get you, you make an appearance too close to shore, they are liable to toss you in the water and make you swim back.” He flashed a cheeky grin at her offended expression then froze as her eyes widened and she raised a hand to his mouth and gently brushed her fingertips against his split lip.

“You were hurt.”

He pulled away as if he had been burned. In a voice more gruff than he intended he replied, “‘Tis nothing, I had not even noticed. Now stay below deck until I come for you.” He opened her door and with his hand on the small of her back nudged her into the room, firmly shutting the door behind her.

She stared wide-eyed at the closed door and listened to his footsteps recede into the distance. “Of all the high handed, obstinate, Ooo ... He better watch I do not throw *him* overboard and make *him* swim home.” She plopped herself down hard on the bunk only to rise seconds later to start pacing the small room again. When a knock came at the door, she had worked herself into a full head of steam, she barked, “What!”

“‘Tis Murphy, Miss Samantha,” he said in a hushed voice. “I

have your bag and the basket Lady Theresa packed for ye.” He was not sure, but he thought he heard her snort right before the door opened. Her color was high and her eyes ablaze when he entered and he found himself having to disguise a chuckle with a cough. Christian was going to have his hands full with this one and Murphy was glad he was along for the ride to watch the young pup fumble his way through.

In Murphy’s mind, the boy was still too young to have acquired the finesse his father had, but he was learning. He could not help himself when he said, “Lucky for the lad the furniture is nailed to the floor, from the look of you, it looks like you would be picking up the first piece you could and be bringing it down on his head.”

She glared at him, “He said I was bad luck, that I should stay below deck so the crew does not toss me overboard and make me swim back. He...he ... Ooo.” She threw up her arms in disgust.

Murphy winced, his brogue becoming more pronounced in his uneasiness, “Ye might be keeping yer voice down or they won’ need to be seeing ye to kin there’s a lady aboard.”

“Not you too?” She looked at him horrified.

“Come now, did he actually say he thought ye were bad luck or that the crew was a superstitious lot?”

“Well...”

“Sailors are by nature and the boy was just trying to make things easier on ye. Now I dinna think they would actually toss you over since this is a short trip, so ye should be safe.” He gave her a lopsided grin and was rewarded with a chuckle from her. “Now then, ye’ve had a rough few days so why not lie down and rest a bit. We will be underway afore you know it, then I shall bring ye on deck meself.”

He was shocked when she came over and hugged him. “You are a very sweet man Mr. Murphy, you are, and I thank you for putting up with me.”

Awkwardly he patted her tiny back with his beefy hands, honestly, there was nothing to her, “There, there lass ye’ll be home with yer brothers before ye know it, then ye can put this whole horrible mess behind you.”



Much to her surprise, Samantha did doze off for a spell, and true to his word, Murphy came to fetch her after they were well under way. He limited her request for fresh air to standing on the stairs with the door ajar, allowing only the slightest bit of icy spray from the channel to assail them. As anticipated, the storm had left St. Georges Channel wickedly rough and the small boat was pitching to and fro rather precariously, “Ye’d be throwing yerself overboard if I let you out there.”

Samantha laughed and allowed him to lead her to the small galley where the captain and some of his crew had come to warm themselves after spending hours in the elements. All ruckus chatter ceased when she entered the room. Warily she surveyed the room, her eyes settling on the only welcoming face. Captain Morris rose with a smile and extended his hands to her, blue eyes sparkling with his honest welcoming. “Miss Prichard it is an honor to have you sailing with us. Captain Archibald Morris at your service Madame, please join me for some refreshments.”

He was a tall, well-built man, probably nearing forty with wavy light brown hair streaked blonde from the sun, his high cheekbones and aristocratic nose still showed signs of a tan. He did not quite fit her image of a sea captain, and his impeccable manners startled Samantha. It would be easier to imagine him having high tea with affluent members of the *ton* as opposed to sitting on a bench, at a gnarled wooden planked table, in a dimly lit cramped room, filled with old seadogs, “Thank you Sir.”

“I trust you find your accommodations suitable? Meager I grant you, but hopefully warm, dry and reasonably comfortable?”

“The cabin is far more than I could have expected, I can assure you I slept rather soundly during my nap. I do hope I have not put you out.”

“Not a’tall. Although this ship is small, we boast four cabins like the one in which you are staying. One is my own and we have three for the guests we sometimes transport. There are also three much larger rooms where the crew’s bunks are, and those rooms too have been designed for their comfort.” He paused and she saw the affirming nods around the room. “I believe if you keep the men well fed, relatively comfortable, and of course pay them a decent wage, they will remain loyal. Most of the men in this room have been sailing with me since my very first voyage, well before I was their Captain.”

“E were a brat in knickers on ‘is father ship’s ‘e was.” The guffaws traveled around the room.

Captain Morris laughed good-naturedly, “And my father taught me well, otherwise you would have been shark bait many years ago old man. By the by, that could still be arranged.” His comment was met with more laughter as the old man in question merely swatted the air with is hand, dismissing the Captain’s empty threat with his own chuckle. Morris scanned the room, “Now gentlemen, there will be a lady onboard until the morrow. Kindly remember that and mind your tongues.”

Satisfied with the grunts and mumbles of agreement, he turned to Samantha, “You may go anywhere you wish except maybe the crews’ cabins, not that I should think you would find anything of interest there. You may ask me or any of my men any questions you may have, again I doubt we do anything that would spark your curiosity. ‘Tis a shame you are sailing with us when the weather is so foul, you truly would have enjoyed the views from the deck.”

She gave the captain a warm smile, letting it travel to each member present in the galley, then settled back on him, “I thank you for your hospitality, I am sure I can find something to amuse myself, ‘tis really a short voyage after all.”

Morris nodded, “Even with the rough sea, we should be docked in time for you to supper with your family tomorrow evening.” He stood and gave her a polite bow, “I have dallied long enough and now I have a ship to captain, so I bid you adieu. May I count on your company for dinner tonight ... yours as well as my other guests of course?”

Samantha glanced at Murphy for affirmation, receiving it she said, “That would be lovely Captain, thank you again.”

“Please have something to eat and I will see all of you in my quarters at nine.” He smiled and he and more than half the men in the room left.

A hearty bowl of soup and a chunk of bread were clunked before Murphy and her by a scrawny old man with a pock scarred face, wild salt and pepper hair and misty pale green eyes. She relayed their thanks and received a grunt in return. She gave Murphy a questioning look but he just smiled and dove into his lunch. Samantha picked at her bread as she watched the scene in the room play out over and over again.

New crewmen would enter the galley, take one horrified look at her then hurry over to one of their seated cohorts. There would be some whispered conversation, a quick glance back in her direction, more whispered conversation, then all was back to normal until the next man would walk through the door. She hated to admit it, but maybe Christian was right ... and where the blazes was he? She had not seen him since he deposited her in her cabin.

She was about to ask when Murphy interrupted her, “Best be eating or ye will insult the cook and ye do not want to be doin’ that after he was so nice to ye.”

“Nice to me?” she squeaked at his absurd statement.

“Sure, have ye seen him bring anyone else’s food out to them?”

“Yours.”

“That is only on account of ye sitting with me.” She was about to argue but he continued, “Known him for years, first time he has ever put food in front of me. Would not be surprised if it were the first time he put food in front of anybody.”

Samantha laughed, then let out a little gasp, “You are serious?” He nodded. “Oh, well then I guess I better not leave a crumb. I definitely would not want to upset the poor man.” For the first time she really looked at the food in front of her, the bowl was huge and the chunk of bread was closer to half a loaf. She let out a long distraught sigh and picked up her spoon when a pair of beefy hands clasped around her bowl.

She looked up as Murphy’s eyes darted around the room,

making sure no one was paying them any mind. He then lightened her bowl by a third and returned it to her. She tore off a chunk of the bread and gave him the remainder and a smile of gratitude.

After a valiant effort to finish her downsized portion of the surprisingly tasty fare, she gave up, swearing if she ate another bite she would surely explode, and returned her bowl to the kitchen. The cook had his back to the door, busily chopping items for dinner. She entered quite silently but still he froze when the delicate scent of jasmine invaded his space.

His scowl did not daunt her, "I came to thank you for that delicious lunch," she took a breath and plowed on, "although the portion was a bit too manly for me. I am sorry, I just could not finish it all." She handed him her near empty bowl which he promptly inspected, gave her a nod and a 'Humph' and turned his back. Dismissed, she exited the tiny sweltering room never seeing the big gap-toothed smile on the old man's face. *That'll put some meat on those skinny bones of hers*, he thought and happily went back to his work.

With lunch out of the way, Murphy volunteered to play ship's tour guide to help occupy their time. They had not gone very far when he caught Samantha trying to stifle a yawn, "I must be boring ye to tears."

She shook her head, "Not a'tall, I am actually quite fascinated. I am just so sleepy all of a sudden."

"Not surprising, a full belly and the rocking of the boat would lull most people. Let's get ye back to yer cabin so ye can rest up before supper."

She let out an unladylike groan, "Supper...I doubt I will be able to eat again until supper tomorrow."

He chuckled as he led her to her room. When they reached her door he said, "Either Master Bradford or I will come and get ye a few minutes 'til nine."

"Mmm. By the by, where is Master Bradford? I have not seen him since we boarded."

"Oh I am sure he is been busy with one thing or another." He evaded, "Ye'll see him at supper, now get some rest."

“Yes Sir,” she said but softened her reply with a teasing twinkle in her eye and a jaunty salute. She closed the door and yawned again. *Maybe I shall lie down just for a little while*, she was sound asleep in minutes.



It was Murphy who retrieved her for supper. Trying to mask her disappointment, she peeked at him from behind her door and gave him a sheepish look, “Would you mind terribly fastening my last few buttons? Try as I may, I cannot manage the task on my own.”

Murphy gave her a pained look but told her to turn around, then proceeded to fumble with the several buttons between her shoulder blades. “Beggin’ yer pardon, but these hands weren’t meant for no tiny buttons.”

“I am grateful for your assistance.” She had donned a pale yellow dress with a low neckline and discrete beading from the loaner collection, she needed to find out exactly who this Lady Suzanne was so she would be able to thank her properly for her generosity.

“Is yer hand alright or does it need tendin’?” He was far more apt at bandaging wounds than he was at bloody pearl buttons.

“No ‘tis fine, Lady Tess wrapped it well this morning and it has not come loose.”

“There, that’s the last of um.” He grumbled disgustedly, “No offense miss, but next time find someone with more nimble fingers for the task. Those damned buttons nearly got the best of me they did.”

Samantha burst out in a fit of giggles at the image of the Goliath Murphy being done-in by a handful of tiny pearls.

He let her catch her breath, then he asked, “Ready? Supper’s surely waiting us by now.”

She allowed him to lead her to the Captain’s cabin. He knocked on the door.

“Come.” When the door opened, Captain Morris and Christian rose, “Ah, Miss Prichard, so glad you could join me this

evening.” He walked over to her, clasped her hand and raised it to his lips. Christian’s eyes narrowed then became unreadable, but not before Murphy registered the change. He toyed with making an excuse for not being able to join them for the meal, but decided the evening might just prove too interesting for him to resist witnessing it firsthand.

“Samantha please.” She beamed at the handsome older man before she delicately extricated her hand from his grasp. Christian’s jaw clenched when Samantha gave Captain Morris leave to use her Christian name, a privilege she had yet to award to him.

He smiled, “A glass of wine before dinner is served?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.” He pulled out her chair and seated her before he went to the bar to pour her the offered wine. She met Christian’s gaze across the table. He looked tired and slightly rumpled she noted, wondering if he was not joking about not faring well at sea.

Little did she know he had spent the past several hours with an operative sent by his uncle. In the past twenty-four hours there had been thwarted attempts on both his uncle’s life and the life of Monsieur de la Rues. For the three people who supposedly were the only ones with any knowledge of the list to come into peril in such a small window of time was far too much to be coincidence in Christian’s estimation. Someone else, someone on the inside, had to have made himself privy to the knowledge, but who?

Until he could answer that, he would have to look at everyone as suspect. It bothered him he was so far away from home, reduced to the status of escort. Oh, he would keep her safe as he promised his uncle, but soon as Christian had Samantha safely in the fold of her family, he would head back to London to protect his own.

*Quit kidding yourself fool, you will not be able to turn away from her until you know she is truly safe. Her brothers may love her, but can they protect her as you can? Are you willing to take that chance?* He had to be honest with himself, no, he would not take that chance. He would stay with her until he knew there was no longer a threat, however long it took. His cousin Derrick and his friend Matthew, both agents, were in London to back up Uncle Aaron. His assignment was to be here with Samantha.

Morris placed the glass of wine in front of Samantha and one

with whiskey in front of Murphy then settled himself to Samantha's right. Before any conversation could start, there was another knock at the door and two crewmen walked in carrying trays laden with food. Samantha's eyes widened at the seemingly endless selection which lay around them, venison, duck and pork, piping hot bread, a variety of steamed or boiled vegetables, as well as fresh apples and candied fruits and nuts.

She sat back and watched as one of the crewmen carved the meat. Her bewilderment must have shown clearly on her face because Captain Morris spoke up. "We are afforded such luxuries because our voyages are quite short, eight to ten days full circle at most, so we are able to stock our supplies frequently, and before you ask, yes my crew is offered the same feast. It is a 'last night of the voyage' tradition, again keeping with my happy crew philosophy."

"Honestly, I was rather impressed with the spread, and if lunch was any indication, this should prove delicious."

He raised his glass of wine and toasted her, "Well then, enjoy."

Dinner consisted of tales of some past voyages and their more colorful passengers' hysterical escapades. Samantha was thoroughly enjoying the stories and some of Murphy's comments, occasionally letting her gaze fall on Christian's brooding one. If he chose to be a stick in the mud and not enjoy himself, so be it, he was not ruining her evening. After one of Captain Morris' most outlandish recount, she stopped him gasping for air and mopping the tears from her eyes, "Surely you jest."

"On my honor as a Captain, the Countess hauled off and popped him one. The poor man did not have a chance, was standing too close to the rail and toppled right overboard. Took six men to heave the bloke back into the ship, all his fancy clothes dripping wet, he looked like a drowned peacock."

"Enough, have mercy on me. I have such a pain in my side and my cheeks are starting to ache." When she was able to compose herself she asked, "Do you happen to know whatever became of them?"

"Last spring they were blessed with their fifth...or possibly their sixth child, I am not exactly sure."

Samantha's eyes widened then she burst out laughing again, "Now I know you jest. They hated each other."

"The Marques said any woman who could stand toe to toe with him, and even win sometimes, was not getting away, for truly they were meant to be, this coming from a notorious rake and confirmed bachelor."

She was met by three distinct groans when she said wistfully, "That is probably the most romantic story I have ever heard." She batted her eyelashes and gave a loud flamboyant sigh, then laughed with them when she could no longer hold the act. They were still chuckling when a knock came at the door and a crewman rushed in, "Begging your pardon Captain," he hesitated as he eyed the people seated at the table.

"Spit it out boy, can you not see we are trying to enjoy our supper."

"But Sir..."

"I said out with it."

The boy took a deep breath and locked eyes with the captain, "There is a body on board ... a dead body." Samantha's face paled and Christian's glass froze halfway to his mouth.

Captain Morris looked at Murphy, "How did they bloody find it?" Then he turned back to the boy and demanded, "Who else knows?"

The lad stammered, "Just Phelps and I Sir. We was..."

"Were, we were." The Captain corrected absently, "and it does not matter what you were doing. Murphy can you come with me so we can re-hide your cargo before my entire ship is in a tizzy? If you will excuse us."

When the door closed, Christian took the aborted swallow of his drink, eyeing her over the glass. She stared back unflinching as he rose to refill his glass. She quirked an eyebrow at his continued silence.

"You seem to be having a delightful time," he drawled.

“I am, and you seem to be having a positively dreadful one.”

He snorted, “The man is damn near old enough to be your father.” He could have bit of his tongue the second the words were out of his mouth.

She blinked at him a few times before his meaning sunk in, when it did her eyes changed to molten gold and her color rose, “I have treated Captain Morris no different than I treated your uncle Albert, or did you think I was flirting with him as well.”

“No, I...” he tried.

“And what business is it of yours if I was flirting with the captain? You are not my guardian, not that I need one at my age.”

“I should not have...”

“Damned straight you should not have, and it would do you good to remember that the next time you try to bully me about, you pompous ass.”

She whirled around and headed for the door, just as it was opening, “Thank you Captain for a lovely evening, but I am afraid I have come down with a monstrous headache and I wish to retire for the evening. Good night Murphy, I shall see you in the morning.” She stormed past the two men leaving them staring at her retreating back wondering what could possibly have happened in the few short minutes they were gone. One look at the rage in Christian’s eyes told them it was not a pretty scene they had missed while they were re-securing Mr. Prichard’s remains.

“I think I will bid you a good night as well gentlemen.” He stomped out of the room and turned in the exact opposite direction Samantha had gone.

*You handled that brilliantly, she is right, you are a pompous ass. What in God’s green earth was that all about? Moreover, she is right, why should you care if she was flirting with Archie?* Christian was thoroughly disgusted with himself and could not fathom for the life of him what had triggered his rage, and that was what he felt, rage. If she had laughed one more time at one of Archie’s inane tales, he would have strangled one of them, not quite sure which, but one.

He let the frigid wind slap his face and clear his mind. The

weather had passed and the sky was covered with a barrage of stars, their vastness making him feel remarkably insignificant. The bitter cold sliced through his clothing only allowing him a few minutes in the fresh air, then he resigned himself to go back to his cabin to think of an appropriate way to grovel.

Samantha made it back to her room with her head held high, should anyone pass her, they would never know the tight rein she had on her emotions, but as soon as she entered her room and latched the door behind her, she burst into tears.

During the course of the night, Samantha's resolve hardened. She would be polite but impersonal and detached, she could manage for the remaining few hours they had to endure each other's company. 'Twas only 'til dinner time she would have to wait to be rid of him for good, not an unbearable amount of time.

Through sheer determination, she managed to dress herself on her own in a fawn colored number. Normally not a color she would have chosen for herself, but the unusual material used to make the gown lured her. It was weighty like leather but as soft and pliable as velvet and it molded to her form like a glove without being restrictive. Dressing had taken so much of her time she opted to, although highly inappropriate, just brush her hair and let it hang. She went about the room tossing her meager belongings into her bag then sat patiently on her bed until the knock came at her door.

The picture she made in the varying shades of brown took Christian's breath away and made his mouth run dry. Her waist length, spun-honey colored hair had been brushed to a sheen and reflected the light from the room's lamp giving her an almost angelic aura. Her gown lovingly caressed her curves, accentuating her full round breasts, tiny waist and the gentle swell of her hips, and because of the height difference between his aunt and Samantha, a goodly expanse of her delicate ankles and even a glimmer of her shapely calves was showing beneath the hem.

But the one thing about her which stood out the most was her molten golden eyes which were currently filled with such fire, they mesmerized him, rendering him speechless. For a few moments, all he could do was stare. Then she broke his trance, she slammed her bag into his chest for him to carry and stormed past him without a word.

He let her pass. He deserved that and more for the way he treated her last night. Perhaps after they had eaten she would calm

down enough so he could apologize properly for his behavior. She never gave him the chance. She swooped into the galley, snatched a chunk of cheese and hunk of bread, bade Murphy and Captain Morris a good morn, and swept out of the room.

Morris and Murphy exchanged a baffled look then both shot Christian an accusing glare as they descended upon him.

“Sit,” Murphy ordered. Christian started to take a defensive stance then relented, he had known Murphy long enough to know it was better to let him vent now than letting it build, for then the eruption could be quite ugly. “What did ye do to that poor child?”

“The light has completely left her eyes. She stared right through us just now.” This from Morris as he and Murphy took their seats.

He looked at the two scowling men sitting across from him and sighed, “I was an ass.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands then raked his fingers through his hair. He was not about to admit the exact nature of their argument so he settled for, “I accused her of something without any justification and now I have to smooth things over.”

He started to rise but Murphy captured his arm, “Not just yet. She needs some time to cool off and ye still have some explaining to do. I knew I should not have let ye fetch her this morning after the way she left last night.”

He leered at the older man, muscles in his cheek flexing as he clenched his jaw in annoyance, “Can you not just let it go, knowing I made a mistake and have every intention of apologizing?” At Murphy’s glower, he knew he was not getting off the hook. *Who worked for whom here*, he thought in disgust, then shook his head at the answer, *I may pay his salary, but he still works for my Father*. He let out a hiss through his teeth, shot Morris a pained look and confessed, “I accused her of flirting shamelessly with you.”

Morris’ burst of laughter had the others in the room looking at them, making Christian feel the sickening knot in his stomach as he did when he was a child. The only difference was now there were no telltale signs of his embarrassment. Over the years, he had perfected the shuttered mask, hiding any and all emotions unless he chose for them to be seen. Now his expression challenged Morris to deny it.



Still chuckling he defended himself, "My days of deflowering maidens are long behind me boy. Do not get me wrong, she is lovely, smart and quite enchanting. It even did this old heart good to know I was still a charmer, but honestly, I must be twice the girl's age."

"As if that would stop any man," Christian challenged.

"True," he admitted with a wolf-like grin, "but this man happens to be content with a little red-head with emerald eyes that would make St. Patrick himself weep, back in Dungarvan. If you are lucky, you will catch a glimpse of her when we dock." Captain Morris sat back with a smug look on his face, patiently waiting for what the young man would say next.

"I have fully admitted I was an ass and the accusations were unjustified."

Murphy let out a snort, "And what right do ye have to pass judgment? Ye have no claim on the chit, no rights what so ever."

Fire leapt into Christian eyes before he could mask it. Murphy was right, he had no rights. Those rights would fall to her brothers in just a few short hours. That simple fact should have eased his emotions, not make them war. This overwhelming possessively protective urge was foreign to him and he was not enjoying it.

"Go on deck lad and use some of that infamous charm on her, but be careful. I do not need to be fishing you out of the water when she dumps your sorry carcass overboard." Morris let out another belly laugh when Christian shot him a murderous glare.

Although the autumn sun was weak, it still made standing at the bow bearable, the storm had passed and the sky was now a cloudless azure blue. The coastline of her beloved homeland was now visible on the horizon. It would not be long until she was home. Home, bittersweet emotions boiled up within her. She could not wait to see her brothers, take comfort from their strength and love, but the trepidation of facing the empty manor threatened to overtake her.

She drew in a ragged breath, fighting back the burning clog of tears in her throat. She needed to be strong. She needed to find the monsters responsible and avenge her father's death. She needed to swallow her pride and ask Christian for his help, she just had to go about it in a logical way. A straight business proposition she thought would be the best way to handle it. She would hire his services, she

had the means, and when they were through, they would part ways on amicable terms.

Her skin prickled and her back stiffened before she could stop it. She knew she was being watched and without looking, she knew who was doing the watching. Samantha fought the urge to turn, she needed just a few more moments to solidify her game plan in her mind, but it was apparent she would not be allotted the time. From her peripheral vision she could see his arms lean against the railing to her left, his fingers were intertwined and he remained silent. She vowed not to be the one to break the silence. He was the one who was out of line with his atrocious accusations, it should be he who offered the olive branch.

“I believe I owe you an apology,” he started. She snorted and continued to stare out at the approaching shoreline, be damned if she was going to make this easy on him. He could do with some humility. “My comments last night were reprehensible and I am truly sorry.”

Gone was the arrogant oaf she could so easily be angry with, she had expected him to completely dismiss what had happened, not the soft-spoken sincere words. *Damn him, damn him and damn these stupid tears. What the devil is with you girl? Pull yourself together, you are acting like a ninny.*

When she still would not look at him, he turned her toward him and was unprepared to see her eyes swimming in unshed tears. He muttered a stream of oaths beneath his breath and pulled her into his arms. She did not resist, just buried her face into his chest and let her arms rest loosely on his hips. He rested his chin on her head and gently stroked her back and hair, silently berating himself for upsetting her. They remained in the embrace for a moment, for an hour, neither knew, each taking from the other what they needed, his need to give comfort, her need for something stable in a world suddenly shaky.

He murmured something into her hair, so she pulled back just far enough to look up at him. He looked into her questioning eyes, pewter met gold. He tucked a wind loosened curl behind her ear but let his hand remain by her neck, then he repeated in a hoarse whispering plea, “Forgive me?”

She stared into his turbulent eyes as they ran the gamut from galena to coal. Her lips parted on a minute gasp when his thumb stroked her jaw. She forgot to breathe entirely as his lips gently

brushed hers, tasting, teasing before their warm firmness covered hers completely. Her eyes fluttered shut as she let herself float on the sensation of his incredibly tender kiss, there was no demand, no urgency, just gentle discovery as their scents and tastes mingled. The kiss ended as softly as it started yet neither was unaffected.

She could not repress a shiver as a cold gust of air swept between them breaking the spell. "You are cold," Christian stated in a gravelly voice, "Go inside until we land at Dungarvan, shan't be but an hour at this point." Apparently, the kiss made her mute, for all she could do was lamely nod her head and allow him to pilot her to the door leading below boards.

He kissed the top of her head and said, "You go warm up and I will come find you just before we dock. You may be interested in watching the process, this crew can be quite...aerobatic." He chuckled at her frown, "try to sweet-talk the cook into a care package. We still have a fairly lengthy ride ahead of us after we leave the ship. I would prefer not to stop if we do not have to." Again, her response was a nod as she turned and descended the stairs.

Christian said aerobic, Samantha thought daft, while she watched agape as men simultaneously shimmied up the masts to tend to the sails. One man in particular reminded her of an African monkey she had read about once in a book, swinging from the riggings as if they were jungle vines. She gasped and peeked through her fingers when he looped something over one of the ropes and started to slide down from the dizzying height. She was sure he would end up in the water but at the last second, he swung his legs up hard and flipped onto the deck, then scurried off to his next assignment as if what he had just done was not even worth a second thought.

Christian crooked an eyebrow when Samantha looked at him wide-eyed, "Close your mouth love, you look like a carp." He giped then laughed when he actually heard her teeth chomp together. "I told you you would find it entertaining."

"The man is mad. Is it like this every time?"

"Weather permitting."

She looked horrified. "Has there ever been ..."

"An accident?" He supplied when she faltered. "Nothing major, he has honed his...craft over many years."

"Years but he is just a lad?" She sputtered.

"That lad has ten years on me." He laughed and shook his head, her mouth was opened again. "Fret not, they know what they are doing. Now, I shall see if a carriage has been arranged for us. Give the Captain a few moments longer to make sure everything is secure, then you can say your good-byes." She watched him descend the gangplank and head down the dock.

Patiently she watched the crew go about their tasks and smiled, it was almost like watching a choreographed dance. You just

needed to look beyond the surface chaos to see how deftly they worked. It was Captain Morris who had sought out Samantha. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, "It was truly a pleasure having you on board, I hope it will not be the last."

Samantha smiled and gave him a curtsy, but before she could reciprocate his kind words, something had distracted him on the dock. The sparkle in his eyes and the dazzling grin had her turn in curiosity. Approaching the ship was a beautiful woman with a mass of flaming hair and the most incredible green eyes, which she could make out at over twenty paces away. Samantha smiled as she watched the two, they only had eyes for each other as if everything around them had faded into the background. It warmed her to watch two people so obviously in love. She hated to interrupt but she figured the sooner he completed the courtesies the sooner the two of them could be together, "She is lovely. Is that your wife?"

Not taking his eyes off the woman now standing at the fringe of the gangplank he said, "Not yet," then looked startled at his own admission.

Try as she might, Samantha could not control her grin. "Well then, you need to remedy that, and I need to be on my way. Thank you for returning me home safely."

Captain Morris gave her an almost boyish grin, turned and descended to the dock. Although Samantha could not hear what they were saying, she could not draw her eyes away from the couple. Morris took the smiling woman's hands in his and said something which made her eyes widen to saucers. After a brief moment she nodded. Morris let out a whoop, picked her up and spun her around then kissed her soundly for all to see.

"What's all the hullabaloo?" She heard Murphy ask from behind her.

"I believe your friend Captain Morris is about to get married." She answered.

"That will be a cold...." He let out a low whistle when he saw the couple. "She is incredible."

"Mmm. I could not hear them, but I would wager I just watched him propose."

“Well I’ll be. Never thought the day would come,” he muttered as he shook his head in disbelief.

“That day comes for almost everyone.” She turned inquisitive eyes on him, “So when will your day be coming Mr. Murphy?”

She watched his eyes cloud over and her smile faded, “I’m afraid I overlooked my chance Missy.”

“What was her name?” she asked quietly.

“Emma, and if I was not such a fool she would be mine now.”

“‘Tis never too late. Go to her, tell her how you feel.” She urged.

“I am no good at using my words, besides it’s been too long. She is probably married with a whole brood of kids. Honestly I would not even know where to look.” He let out a heavy sigh then said, “Now enough of this old man’s ramblings, let’s see about getting ye home. Ready?”

She nodded and slipped her arm through his, allowing herself to be led from the ship, the whole time wondering where she would be able to find this mysterious Emma.

The warm breeze ruffled his shoulder length raven hair and he squinted his aquamarine eyes against the brilliant midday sun. His coat had been abandoned the day before and his hat the day before that. Sean definitely preferred this to England in the late fall. He knew this is where he would settle and start a family once the war was over and his beloved country safe.

They would be traveling for at least three more days before they would meet up with the Victory, so for now he had nothing to do but enjoy the steadily warming weather. He closed his eyes, turned his face to the sun and let out a long contented sigh.

“Sure beats the rain and sleet we left behind.”

“Mmm,” was all he murmured at his friend’s observation. He was not moving. He wanted to relish this feeling for as long as possible.

“Alright dreamer, come back to the ship and look at the horizon. Cannot be sure yet, but that looks like the Glory and she seems to be in trouble. We should be able to see her markings clearly within the hour. If it is not her, we may have some company.”

“Let me take a look.” He took the spyglass from John and stared out at the ocean. “It sure looks like her. The main mast has been sheared off at the half and the mizzen sail is in tatters. Even if it is not the Glory, that ship is in distress. You deal with your men and I shall see if Doc needs a hand. Lordy this is sure to put him in a fine snit, especially after the bad meat fiasco the night before last.”

John laughed, “Be madder than a wet hen he will. I appreciate whatever help you can offer, and Sean...thank you.”

“Tskh” he scoffed as he headed below deck.

With the shifting trade winds it took almost two hours for

the Ajax to pull alongside the Glory, and when they did they were horrified. It was amazing the once majestic ship was still afloat. The main mast was in fact sheared off at half, the mizzen was badly battered and the fore was completely gone. The deck and sails were singed from numerous fires, the port side sported a gaping hole, a hole large enough that if they were in the more turbulent waters near home, they would have surely sunk. The deck was littered with the dead or dying, there was not a man on board who had not been wounded to some degree. The smell of burnt flesh and of bodies rotting in the hot tropical sun permeated the air, gagging those who attempted to help.

John ordered a group of twenty men to dump the bodies of the dead overboard and another fifty to try and save the ones who were still alive, rotating his crewmen with a fresh batch every half hour. The mass carnage they were witnessing would break the strongest man if he were exposed for too long. He regretted Sean, Doc and three others were the only ones qualified to tend to the injuries, there would be no respite for them.

They worked frantically the remainder of the day, through the night and well into the next day. John helped where he could, but he had his hands full with coordination of the triage and the shark feeding frenzy the dead bodies in the water had caused. His crew was exhausted, the last thing he needed was one of his men becoming bait. The deafening mocking cry of the gulls circling overhead like vultures then diving into the once crystalline water, now brown and red from the partially devoured corpses, searching for their own meal was a nauseating backdrop to the morbid scene and acrid stench.

It was three in the afternoon before the last of the injuries were tended and the Glory was stable enough to be towed to a nearby island for repairs. All officers aboard her were dead so John had no choice but to take command of her remaining men, all one hundred forty two of the original six hundred, and at least a dozen more would not make it to the island.

The staggering loss of life was sinking in and making him sick to his stomach, he needed air, he had to get on deck in the open. The heated motionless salt air did nothing to diminish his queasiness. His vision started to sway.

Sean found him retching over the side a few minutes later. He had watched John's hasty retreat from the makeshift hospital ward they had erected in the galley, and followed closely behind with a



blackjack of bishop. When the last of his stomach had been emptied, he turned and slid down the wall, thankfully, partially shaded from the merciless heat of the sun.

Sean sat next to him and pressed the drink into his hand, "Small sips." He cautioned and was offered a grunt in response even though John obeyed the order he had been given as he sipped the wine/water mixture. "Some friend you are," Sean teased and John warily opened one eye at his friend. "Where were you in the middle of the night when I was retching my guts out and nearly fell overboard?"

"Waist deep in body parts." He shuddered at the images assailing his mind. "It disgusts me what men can do to each other and for what, power, glory? What kind of glory can be gained from killing almost five hundred people? Killing sons and husbands and fathers?" He shook his head and stared off down the deck.

"Did you find out what happened?"

"Glory was separated from the group during a storm two days ago. When the weather cleared they found themselves virtually surrounded by Spanish ships. Why they did not just surrender the ship and save these lives..."

Sean shook his head although John could not see through his closed eyes, "Would you have? I doubt it. These men would have rather died fighting than been captured and subjected to horrors unknown at the hands of the Spanish or French."

"You are right, I know, 'tis obvious they were hell bent on spilling British blood." He groaned, rubbed his face, then raked his hands through his hair and got to his feet, "What kind of Captain would my men think I was if they saw me like this?"

Although the question was not meant to be answered Sean did, "A man not ashamed to show how much all this really matters to him." Sean clasped John's shoulder, "Let's get some rest then get the hell out of these blood stained waters."

Wearily the two friends headed below deck toward their beds, both silently praying nightmares of the hell they just visited would not prevent the sleep they so desperately needed.

Melancholy would be the best way to describe her feelings as the carriage meandered through Kilkenny. The mid-day bells were ringing St. Canices Cathedral. The usual hustle and bustle surrounding Kilkenny Castle was in full swing. There was a wolfhound racing around a meadow barking furiously trying to corral some wayward sheep. The clean fresh smell of impending winter filled the air. It was a day just like any other, her devastating loss had no effect on the world. It continued without even a hiccup. She braced herself for the inevitable flood of emotion bound to hit her as the carriage wound to a stop in front of her home. Briarwood Manor had not been the same since her mother had passed and now with her father gone as well...

She breathed a ragged sigh as Christian opened her door and stepped inside, he had elected to ride with Murphy just in case the carriage again came under attack. Closing the door behind him, he sat across from her and took her hand in his, "How are you faring?" She attempted a smile but, as her eyes started to fill, she lowered them to stare at their joined hands. She never considered herself a small woman, yet her hand looked almost childlike clasped in his. It gave her a sense of security, but she shook off the fanciful notion.

*He is only here until this matter has been resolved, then he will leave me ...just like everyone else. Oh for the love of Pete, snap out of it, you do not even like him overly much. Wonderful, now you are lying to yourself on top of it all. Surly you are going daft. Face it love, you two are connected, and as much as you do not want to admit it, you are starting to have feelings for the man.* She let out an exasperated sigh.

Christian could tell she was battling her own demons, so he waited a few moments before he said softly, "Come, let us get you inside." Her head snapped up at his voice, she was so consumed with her thoughts she had forgotten he was there, even though his thumb was rubbing gently over her knuckles. "Gathering wool is much easier, but alas it will not put off the inevitable. Some of your brothers should be here by now and I am sure they are quite anxious to see you." He

studied her solemn eyes and added gently as he raised his hand to caress her cheek, "I will be standing right beside you, you can lean on me."

The promise was clear in his eyes, he meant both physically and emotionally he would help her get through this mess, and she believed him. She gave him a tiny nod. He smiled, brushed the lightest of kisses against her lips and exited the carriage, turned back and lifted her to the ground. When she would only stare at his chest and not look at the house, he raised her chin until their eyes met, "You can do this. They are not going to blame you for what happened to your father." He paused when she paled but then continued in earnest, "Your brothers love you and their only focus should be they did not lose both of you that night." *Could she really think her brothers would blame her for their father's death? That was just plain foolish. How could she have done anything possible to prevent it?*

He started to wonder if maybe the stories she told his Aunt and Uncle about the closeness of her family was just a façade. Should he be worried about leaving her in their care? *Ridiculous, Uncle Aaron would not have sent her home if it was not where she would be safe. The stress of everything that has happened was just overwhelming her.* Still, even with that resolved in his mind, he firmly placed an arm around her waist and escorted her into the house.

The door opened as they reached the steps and a wiry, craggy faced old man said, "'Tis good to have you home Miss Samantha." Before she could reply to his greeting, a plump woman who barely reached to Samantha's chin came bustling past him. "Get out of me way you old coot. Where's me baby girl? Oh child you have given me such a fright," she exclaimed as she drew Samantha into her arms and hurried her inside. "When that man came and told us what happened. Oh your poor father. Retched villains they was that done this. I hope they rot in Hell. And to think they would take a hand to you. I'll string um up meself if I find um, I will. Now let me see what they did to me girl." She let Samantha go just far enough to pinch her chin as she turned her face from side to side examining the damage.

Christian and the man who opened the door exchanged glances. The old man rolled his eyes and Christian had to suppress a chuckle as he handed the butler his coat. The woman, he assumed to be the housekeeper, was a pint-sized whirlwind.

"Well I guess I have seen worse," she said after a thorough examination of Samantha's face. "Now child, give me your cloak and

get yourself into the library. Patrick's in there with a mountain of a man lookin' suspiciously like the one you brought with you. I'll get you some tea and, Oh Lord in heaven," she cried when Samantha removed her cloak revealing her bandaged arm, "what have they done to me baby? They should be hung! They should be made to rot in goel! They...they..."

"Come mother, leave the poor girl be." This from the butler as he gently turned her and shepherded her out of the room "Master Patrick is waiting for her, let's fetch the children some refreshments, and ...." His voice faded as they disappeared around a corner.

Samantha gave Christian a weary smile and tried to explain, "Mr. and Mrs. Avery, they have been with us since before Patrick was born. He is a staunch proper English chap and she is a ball of fire from indiscernible descent. It amazes me how they get on so well when they are so completely different, but they do, you can plainly see the affection they have for one another." Her smile was almost wistful as she stared down the empty hall where the couple was last seen.

"And their affection for you is equally as evident."

She flashed him a smile, "The feeling is quite mutual I assure you."

Though fleeting, he had caught a glimpse of the real Samantha, one not burdened by the tragedy and grief which currently embroiled her, and he felt her smile down to his soul. His breath caught in his chest and his stomach clenched. Seconds felt like hours before he managed to re-gather his scattered wits. *You have gone over the bend man, all she did was smile, and that smile was for the Averys not you.* He had to clear his throat twice before he could speak, "Mrs. Avery said the man talking with your brother looked suspiciously like me. That can only be one of two people and I can most assuredly rule one of them out. Come, I shall introduce you to my father."

She was surprised, it showed, but she nodded anyway. "This way," she said as she led him down the hallway to the right. At the end of the corridor she paused and took a steadying breath. He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. When she looked at him he reiterated, "I meant what I said, you can lean on me." Not waiting for a response, he reached past her to open the door, and then with a hand on the small of her back nudged her into the room.

This was no usual library. Oh, there were books, two walls of

floor to ceiling mahogany bookcases, complete with rolling ladders, filled with them, but the remaining two walls contained a magnificent grey stone fire place and floor to ceiling windows. Each window was flanked by small slit windows which ran the complete height of the room and were etched with elaborate designs. Each window grouping was partitioned by mahogany planks which traveled from the wide floorboards and melded into the exposed beams in the ceiling, both in matching wood. The planks were adorned by three armed sconces which hung eight feet from the floor. Leather couches and chairs encircled a Mashhad rug, the complimenting reds bringing life and warmth, no small feat considering the sheer size of the room.

Graydon and Patrick turned in unison at the echoing sound of Christian's footsteps against the wooden floor. Samantha gave an inward sigh of relief when the ominous sound was muffled when they reached the carpet. Still more than twenty feet away, she locked eyes with her brother. Although he was only three years her senior, today he looked much older, the signs of strain etched firmly on his attractive face. He stood shoulder to shoulder with the devastatingly handsome older version of the man at her side. In those golden eyes she loved so much, she prayed it was grief she saw not disappointment, for that she would be unable to bare.

Graydon and Christian exchanged glances. He could see as well as sense the tension in his son. He could also see the affection his son had for the girl, but he did not let on, merely gave his son an affirming nod. Christian lowered his hand from the small of her back, but did not step away as Patrick approached.

He crossed to her in several quick strides. Samantha's quivering chin rose, her eyes beseeching as he scrutinized her. "Thank God." The words ripped from his chest as he gathered his little sister close in a crushing embrace, relief flooding over him. His voice rasped when he was finally able to speak, "I should not have let you go alone. I should have listened to you. If anything had happened to you too, I would have never forgiven myself. I am so sorry. I...I..." He could not continue, just held her tighter.

*He does not blame me, he does not think it was my fault.* It took Samantha a few moments to register the truth. She had braced herself for the harsh words, for the scorn. The same scorn she was subject to when her mother was found nearly dead. His hurtful word still rang clear in her mind 'you can save a stranger but not our own mother'. He had turned from her in disgust back then, not listening to her when she cried she had no control over what she saw. Their relationship had

been strained at best over the past four years. She even debated if it was Patrick she should turn to when she saw her father's fate, but she did, and was dismissed, then there had not been enough time to get word to Liam or Séamas.

With one brother spiteful and the other two out of town on business, she was left to her own devices. She had convinced her father to take her with him to London stating she needed to purchase fabric for gowns. It was not until they had reached London when she finally told her father he was in danger. "My entire life I have been in danger my dear. Am I to run and hide because this time I know I will not be able to skirt fate? What I am protecting is far more important than the life of one man."

He had taken her hands then and waited until her tear drenched eyes met his, "I will not court disaster, but if it is destined to find me, I want you to know how much I love you. You and your brothers have been my lifeline when the world I worked in went mad. You are my pride, my joy, my heart and I am truly a better man for having had my life enriched by you. Now, be strong for me. If it is my time, promise me I will be laid to rest next to your mother, then I shall know the secret will be safe for all time. Promise me." He demanded and upon her nod he kissed her brow. Less than three hours later, he was dead and she was left with a gaping hole in her heart.

"A Phádraig," her brother's Gaelic name, was but a sob caught in her throat as she gave him a final squeeze before she pulled out of his embrace. She took a ragged breath and looked at him, "He knew. I told him but it did not matter." Her voice hitched, "He loved us very much, but duty..."

"Yes, duty." Tears showed brightly in his eyes as well. There was no need for words, he knew. He understood all too well his father's sense of duty and honor. It was one of the things he admired most about the man. The one thing above all else he hoped he could emulate.

She looked now into her brother's eyes and saw understanding not recrimination and she crumbled. "I tried. I begged, I pleaded, but ..."

"Hush now," he pulled her back into his arms. "I know you did all you could. It is not your fault." He took a deep breath and went on, "Just like it was not your fault four years ago." He felt her stiffen in his arms, "Can you ever forgive me? I was hurt. I was angry and I

needed someone to blame. Unfortunately, you were the easiest target. When you came to me with your fears last week, it brought back all the emotions, all the pain. I just could not handle that our lives were going to be torn apart yet again. I did not want to believe and my pigheadedness nearly cost you your life.”

She looked up at him then, the tears flowing unchecked from his eyes as well as hers. She laid a hand on his cheek and brushed away a tear with her thumb, “I love you and nothing will ever change that.” He covered her hand and was grateful for the acceptance and forgiveness he saw in her face.

Graydon crossed the room to stand next to his son, Christian was clearly shaken by the exchange he had witnesses. Graydon could see the wheels turning in his son’s mind as he processed the information. Graydon laid a comforting hand on his shoulder but said nothing, letting his son come to terms on his own time. He remembered the first time he was exposed to Samantha’s gift, it shook him to the core. He did not believe, did not want to believe what he had seen with his own eyes.

She had been perhaps four or five at the time. Graydon had returned from an assignment, Christian was staying with his Aunt Tess and Uncle Albert and Graydon had no desire to return to an empty house, so he had stopped at his brother’s. They had been chatting when Samantha came tearing into the room sobbing Patrick had fallen from the tree and was hurt badly. Nathaniel and Aaron raced from the room. Graydon, after taking a moment to register what the child had said, was a few paces behind. As he was leaving the room he heard his niece Anna say, “I do not know Mamma, we were in my room playing with the dolls and she just started to run. She was so scared Mamma.”

“Hush Anna, it will be alright, Patrick will be alright, you will see.” Graydon thought Suzanne’s comments were strange but he did not have time to question. He rounded the corner of the yard just in time to see a boy fall from the top of one of the oak trees into his brother’s arms. Aaron grunted at the force which the boy had landed, but was able to cradle the child. Nathaniel rushed over to them. The boy had some scrapes and bruises but was no worse for wear. If they had been even a second or two later the boy would have been dead.

Too stunned to speak, Graydon returned to the house and walked straight to the bar and poured himself two fingers of brandy. He drank deeply then turned to look at the little girl who was now happily playing with his niece in the corner of the room. He heard

Suzanne's voice by his side, "Patrick is fine, yes?" Mutely he nodded. "She is an incredible child is she not?"

He stared at his sister-in-law trying to comprehend. "Colleen said it started over a year ago. At first they did not pay Samantha's comments much mind, but then they started to notice there were far too many times for it to be mere coincidence. 'The constable's wife with two babies', a few weeks later she gave birth to twins. 'The poor old man who smelled funny', a lonely neighbor had passed away and no one knew. 'Little Brian McCormick lost and scared', a two year old had wandered off into the woods. It took until just recently for Samantha's speech to improve enough for them to realize the depth of what was happening and she could articulate more clearly. Colleen said it was rather daunting, they could go on for weeks and Samantha would just be a normal child. They would even forget at times, but then she would turn pale and ghostly and tell you about something or someone as if she had just seen the whole thing play out before her eyes. The child has been given a gift, let us pray it will be put to good use."

Truly dumfounded, Graydon still could only stare, except now his gaze was on the innocent child. "You called it a gift. You should pray she does not find it a curse."

Nathaniel brought his family to Aaron's house only once more after that for an extremely brief visit and Graydon was there at the time as well. Samantha was nine at the time and he remembered her as very quiet and shy. She would not even play with Anna, so Anna dismissed her and went to play with the boys. Within an hour of Graydon's arrival, they were gone and he had not seen her again until today. He well knew the conflict his son was experiencing, waging logic against the truth. He did not envy him.

When brother and sister finally acknowledge their guests Graydon said to Samantha, "The vicar will be here in the morning at eight. Peters?"

"Peterson," Patrick corrected when Graydon gave him a questioning look.

"Peterson is seeing to all the arrangements at your grandparents' estate. My son and I will be here to see this through."

"Thank you Sir Bradford." Patrick extended his hand.



“Graydon please,” he said as he accepted the handshake.

“Graydon then, may I reintroduce you to my sister Samantha?”

As Graydon clasped her hand his son asked, “Reintroduce?”

“Yes, I have met Samantha on two prior occasions.” He smiled wickedly at his son, “and you have met her too.”

“I have not. Surely I would have remembered.”

“Oh, it does not surprise me that you do not remember. She and her brothers were only at your uncle’s for a few hours and you were too busy playing with Patrick, Liam and Séamas to pay Samantha any mind.”

Christian’s brow was furrowed in concentration, but for the life of him he could not recall. “Do not hurt yourself boy, you were only ten at the time.” He chuckled.

Samantha pursed her lips, “I do not recall meeting you either.” Her gaze stared off into nothing as she tried to remember, “I do remember Anna asking me to come outside and play, but for some reason I would not.”

“You looked very sad that day as I recall.” Graydon offered.

Patrick filled in the blanks. “That was the day our grandfather died. We did not find out until three days later when we returned home.”

Patrick’s words seem to hang in the air. After a long pause, Christian looked at the three of them and said, “I need to see if Murphy needs my help.” He turned and strode out of the room.

Samantha looked after him, wanted to go to him, to explain, but Graydon’s words stayed her, “Let him go. He needs to figure it out in his head before he can deal with it.” He kissed the knuckles of her hand he was still holding. “He will come around, not to worry.”

Patrick watched the exchange between his sister and Graydon, “Why would she need to worry?” Graydon raised an eyebrow, a move so like his son’s she averted her eyes, so Graydon looked at Patrick, “I cannot answer for your sister because I do not

know her well enough, but as for my son, I can tell you he is quite taken with her. I have never seen him quite so...protective.”

Patrick looked from Graydon’s knowing smile to the flush on Samantha’s cheeks. “Well,” was all he said.

Dawn was drawing near when the Ajax met up with the Victory at Cape St. Mary's. The waning crescent moon was still fairly high and the inky black sky sparkled with stars. A lone gull's soulful cry cut through the silence, a monk seal barked and his mate answered. The complete stillness of the night allowed the two mighty ships to get close enough for Sean and John to traverse the distance from one deck to the other without having to row from ship to ship, chances were they would not be so lucky when it was time to return. All was quiet except for the few hands who manned the deck during the overnight hours.

In spite of the earliness of the hour, they were immediately escorted to Lord Nelson's cabin. Armed with a pilfered battle map and several intercepted missives, Sean entered the room confident the information he had would enable their Admiral to thwart the dictator's plan and avoid falling into the tyrant's carefully laid trap. The Commander greeted them as they entered, his appearance belied the brilliant strategist's reputation. Lord Nelson was a slight man, rather sickly looking in fact. He only had one arm, the sleeve of the other was pinned to his tattered uniform. His mass of wavy white hair was pulled back, cinched at his neck. If it were not for his piercingly astute eyes, he could have been easily dismissed as insignificant.

Over the next several hours Sean detailed what he had learned over his months undercover. The name, rank and function of every man in Bonaparte's and Villeneuve's elite circle, the vital statistics on every ship within both the Spanish and French fleet, and most importantly, every detail of the forged replacements for the intercepted missives were scrutinized, rehashed and scrutinized again. The Commander even chuckled at some of the merry chases Sean's rewritten missives must have sent his enemy on. "I am glad you are on our side son," he told him. "Oh to have been able to see Villeneuve's face when he figured out he was chasing his own tail," he chuckled, "very creative indeed."

“Thank you Sir,” Sean replied.

“Now John have you been able to convince our young Mr. McCulloch here to stay with us for a while. We could use a few more like him.”

John was starting to shake his head when Sean chimed in, “I believe I can be of much better service in the capacity I am currently occupying.”

“Yes Sir, I believed he has proven just that already.” John supported.

“True, true, I just hate losing a good man to that other organization. Cannot rightfully commend a man for his service when his record does not technically exist.” He grumbled, “Well at least you are fighting for the right side.” He sighed heavily, “Dreadful news about the Glory. Commander Briggs was a fine man, I shall miss him terribly. Fortunate you came upon her when you did John or very likely all would have been lost.”

“There were a hundred and twenty-three still alive when we dropped them on Madeira and I believe that number will hold.” John paled as he spoke. It had been three days and the images still haunted him, he feared they forever would.

“War is ugly business son, no way around it. Be thankful for the ones that were saved and be comforted the ones who were lost, died in glory, for there is no greater honor than for a man to give his life defending his country. Fine work, both of you. Now, you have left me much to think about. Arrange for two officers from each of our fleet to meet me here tomorrow morning so we can discuss our plan of action. I want to hit that boulder where it hurts him the most. Be damned if he thinks he will out fox me. Thank you gentlemen.” He dismissed.

“Sir.” They replied in unison, bowed and left the Admiral’s quarters.

The vicar arrived at precisely eight in the morning and met with the family for a few moments before they set off for the short journey to the grandparent's estate. Mr. Peterson had fashioned a wooden box for Mr. Prichard, it was simple without looking flimsy. He regretted not being able to make something finer for the man he considered more his friend than his employer, but there had not been time for anything more elaborate.

The casket had been loaded onto a cart drawn by two of the Prichard's finest grays. Behind the cart were several carriages, the first with Patrick, his wife Arianna and their two children. Next was Graydon, Christian, Samantha and the vicar driven by Murphy, following them were the O'Tooles and the Wallingfords, the two closest neighbors and friends. Rounding out the funeral procession were six more carriages containing the entire staff of Briarwood Manor.

As they started up the winding road to Killarn Manor, Samantha stared out the window with a feeling of *déjà vu*. Almost five years ago she made the same solemn trek, only this time the pain was twice as hard to bear. True at nearly two and twenty years old it was hardly cataclysmic, but she was now an orphan, and it shook her to her core.

Sensing her sorrow, Christian leaned over the narrow expanse between them and squeezed her right hand, which was lying limply on her lap. She took a staggered breath and attempted to give him a smile, then turned back to the window. His hand on hers was warm, strong and comforting. She would take what he offered, for she knew all too soon he would be gone as well.

Graydon watched his son watch Samantha. There was a gentleness in the young man's eyes he had not seen before, and it worried him. Whether Christian knew it or not, his father could see he was getting emotionally involved. A distraction such as this could keep a man off his peak, it could prove dangerous or even deadly.

On his journey to Briarwood Manor, Graydon had poured over the files his brother had sent with Titus the messenger. The young man was able to answer most of the questions Graydon had asked, filling him in where the official report lagged. Graydon had asked the boy why after three years with the agency had he not moved over to an operative's position, he had the smarts for it. The young man laughed at him shaking his head saying he did not have the brawn and he was quite happy with research and the occasional errands. It kept him in the action and away from the danger.

Graydon could appreciate that, not everyone was fashioned for field action. He had taken a good look at Titus then. He was young, possibly twenty-three or twenty-four, slightly plump but not fat, with mousy brown hair and non-descript features. The boy reminded him of Samuel, same blend into the background and go unnoticed traits, yet one of the agency's finest operatives. He thought about it a moment longer. Samuel was also one of the top researchers.

Maybe Samuel would take Titus under his wing, possibly employing the same tactic he had with William, Graydon's stepson, for the past several months. He had convinced William research did not necessarily come from a book or file, sometimes you had to look for it in the real world, and if you were going out into the real world, you needed to be trained on certain precautions. Books cannot draw blood, life can, he had been told.

William had been reluctant at first, but had since found he has the knack for field investigation. Possible Titus will find it as well, a certain coming into his own. Perhaps he would have to discuss the issue with his brother when he saw him next, but then again, maybe he would wait until he had a better feeling for Titus himself before he said anything, after all, he really did not know the young man well.

The carriage bumped as it approached Killarn Manor causing Samantha to focus on her surroundings. Waiting somberly upon their horses near the portico were Séamas and Liam. As the carriages passed they fell into the procession, Liam flanking Patrick's carriage and Séamas at Samantha's, the staff of Killarn joined the end of the procession. They wound their way through an archway of trees on a well-traveled dirt road to the far end of the estate where the hills sloped down to serene lake. It was a tranquil plot, a place which held much laughter, a few tears, and many, many memories. It was also the spot where Nathaniel would join Colleen in their eternal resting place.

The family, friends and staff alighted and followed the cart

and the vicar up the hill, where under an ancient oak, next to her mother's headstone, an ominous gaping hole had been dug. Samantha felt the offensive wound, which now marred the picturesque property, matched the wound on her heart, ripped apart and raw. She knew one day the hole in the ground would settle, the grass would cover the mound and the hill would be beautiful once more with barely any sign of its past injury. She prayed the same held true for her. She let the vicar's droning words wash over her, hoping to pull some comfort from them, but was left disappointed. She stole a look around.

Mrs. Avery was crying openly as her husband tried to comfort her. There were tears in the eyes of the rest of the staff as well. Bailey, the man who traveled with Graydon and Donovan the operative who had met with Christian on the ship stood quietly removed, but ever watchful. Arianna was whispering something into Emily's ear as she held her close, trying to keep the three-year-old calm.

Patrick held onto Dylan's hand, both standing straight as arrows, heads bent staring at their shoes. Even at five Dylan was a serious child, much older than his chronological age, and the resemblance between father and son was astounding. Séamas and Liam wore matched expressions, each staring off at some unknown point past the vicar, muscles in their cheeks dancing as they clenched their jaws.

She knew her brothers well, knew what they were thinking. Séamas wanted blood, he would not rest until everyone responsible was held accountable...or dead. At nineteen he was already becoming a force to be reckoned with. He stood a good two inches over his older brothers, considering they were over six feet themselves, his height was quite impressive, and his bulk matched. He was as broad as an ox with not an ounce of excess. He shared his hair color with his sister and his eye color with Liam, a deeply pooled emerald full of facets and light. He was a bit of a hellion and well on his way to becoming a first class rake, one flash of his brilliant white smile and women of any age could feel their heart two-step. He was a man of passion and principal, quick to laugh, to anger, to feel, with a strong sense of right and wrong. One look at his eyes she could see Séamas was seething.

Liam, the most outwardly passive of the siblings, would be worrying about now having to run two estates and all the headaches it entailed. Two full sets of staff he would need to maintain, for their father's staff had been with the family since before they were born, and to him it would be like turning out family. No, he would keep

them all. That settled in his mind, he would worry about her.

Being the second oldest he was not legally her guardian, Patrick was, but Liam would assume the role. With his new duties sorted out and a probable plan of action starting to form in his mind, he would relax for a second and come to terms with his new roles in life. Then, and only then, would he let in the anger, but he would not be driven to act. He would be content in allowing his brothers to seek justice on their father's behalf.

If by some unlikely chance they should fail, then he would seek out his own form of justice. He would be merciless in his pursuit. He would be swift. He would be lethal, but it would cost him dearly, for he would walk away hating himself for allowing the beast to rear its ugly head unchecked. Like all her brothers, Liam was a passionate man and he considered it his biggest flaw, his biggest weakness.

He was logical and methodical with no tolerance for being led by emotions, and on the rare occasions when he could not control this very human abnormality, he would berate himself as if it was a personal failure. It always amazed Samantha they had shared a womb, yet could be so different.

She finished surveying the people around her, saw the shock, the grief and internalized it. She had shed her tears last night in the solitude of her room, gut wrenching sobs which now left her sides aching and her throat raw. She would not break down. Today she needed to be strong, for them. She took a slow uneven breath and let it out, set her shoulders and raised her chin. She would find the list, in her heart she knew she was the only one who could, and destroy it, then the toxin could no longer touch the ones she loved.

Christian, although standing a few feet behind, could sense the change in her. He fought an overwhelming urge to pull her against him, to comfort her, to reassure her she was not in this battle alone, but knew she would not welcome the sentiment. He watched her stare straight ahead at the vicar as he finished his sermon then unflinchingly as the servants lowered her father into the hole and covered the casket with dirt. He did take her arm as they walked to the carriage, but sat silently as they made the short journey back to Killarn Manor.

There was food and drink served to the funeral attendees, hushed conversations were heard throughout the solarium where they had gathered. The boundaries of social class eradicated as Lord



Wallingford complimented Mr. Peterson on the fine craftsmanship of the casket, and Lady O'Toole chatted amicably with Mrs. Avery and Killarn's cook, Jayne, about the wonderful food they had prepared. She was even trying to coax them into helping with her annual Christmastime ball. Mrs. Avery just smiled politely and excused them, sighting they needed to tend to the guests. Mrs. O'Toole was not daunted. She would approach one of the Prichard boys at a more appropriate time and persuade them into parting with their staff for an evening.

Arianna draw near her sister-in-law who was standing next to the door, quietly observing the people in the room. She gave Christian a weak smile, for he was close enough politeness dictated an acknowledgement, yet distant enough not to require being part of the conversation. She took Samantha's hand, "Sorry we did not have a chance to speak last night, after the long trip the children..."

Samantha shook her head and interrupted her, "Do not give it a second thought. You are here, that is all that matters. I have missed you Arianna. I did not realize how much until I saw you holding Emily. She has gotten so big."

"Considering the last time you saw her was at her baptism, I should say so." The words themselves stung a bit even though there was no heat or malice intended.

"Things were so strained between Patrick and me. I did not want you and the children to be uncomfortable."

"Well all that has changed now, has it not?" At Samantha's tentative nod she continued, "He truly is sorry and I hope there is still room in your heart to forgive him. The children sure could use their Aunt Sammy..."

Samantha wrapped her arms around Arianna, "He lashed out in his grief, I was just the closest and easiest target. I love my brother very much, there is nothing to forgive."

Arianna wiped away her tears as Samantha fought to keep her own in check, "So you will come and visit more often?"

"I will come and visit more often."

She smiled, then with a mother's instincts looked across the room just in time to see Dylan start to climb onto a chair near the

buffet. If she did not hurry, he would be on the table in a matter of moments. As she rushed toward her child she called over her shoulder, "Promise?"

"Promise," Samantha confirmed as she watched Arianna deftly scoop up her child mere seconds before his knee touched the table. She settled him on her hip and whispered something in his ear. When he nodded looking contrite with his bottom lip protruding, she kissed his temple then reached for a pastry he was after and handed it to him, then nuzzled his neck as he giggle and took his first bite.

Patrick, who was not able to disengage himself from the conversation in time to help avoid the possible chaos Dylan could have created, now joined his wife and son. He murmured something to them, ruffled his boy's hair and kissed his smiling wife. Emily, not wanting to be left out, toddled her way over to the group and raised her arms for him to pick her up. Watching the loving family unit caused an unfamiliar yearning in Samantha's gut, even as her heart swelled at seeing them so happy together.

"They make a lovely picture."

Samantha turned toward the throaty baritone and smiled at Graydon, "After all they have been through, they deserve to be happy."

Not quite sure what she meant by her statement, but not wanting to pry he just smiled and nodded. "You seem to be holding up extremely well. Who is the act for, yourself or them?"

She stared into his all-too-knowing grey eyes, thought to lie or make a flippant remark then expelled the breath she did not know she had been holding, "What good would it do any of us if I was to fall apart?"

"You are entitled to grieve."

"I know, and I am. My brothers need to focus their concentration on avenging our father's murder. They certainly do not need the added distraction of worrying over their sister. We will all have a job to do, and I fully intend to do my fair share and not be a hindrance to anyone."

Christian, returning from fetching Samantha a drink, bristled. Her last comment to his father opened a pit in his stomach. He pressed

the drink into her hand but said nothing.

“You have grown into a remarkable woman Samantha. Try to remember you are not in this alone.” Samantha blinked when he uttered the same words as his son had the night before. Graydon leaned over and kissed her cheek, gave his son’s arm a squeeze then went to mingle with the crowd.

Christian studied her before he spoke. Her face was pale, the skin almost translucent pulled tight over her high aristocratic cheekbones. There were shadows beneath her slightly red rimmed eyes. Her shoulders were back and her chin high. She was a contradiction, fragility warring with strength. He closed the short distance between them, shielding her view from the remainder of the room so she was forced to focus on him. Gently he tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear, “You should not worry yourself over this. We will find the people who did this and we will keep you safe.” He raised an eyebrow as fire shot into her eyes and a flash of color streaked her cheeks.

“Should not worry myself?” She hissed, “Let the big strong men handle everything...keep me safe? This was my father we are talking about, mine. Be damned if I am going to sit back and do nothing while his killers are still out there threatening my family. It is you who should not worry yourself. You have completed your assignment. I am home safe, you are free to go.”

She turned to storm away but he caught her by the arm and swung her around none too gently. The pressure from his fingers made her wince, but she would not back down. She met his glare straight on, unblinking. He was furious, his smoky eyes black, his jaw tightly clenched as he tried to rein in his anger.

Barely in check he grated out, “You best resolve yourself now to the fact that I am not going anywhere. Although I did not know him, your father was important to my uncle therefore his murder is important to me. I will remain here and see this through, with or without your blessing.” Now it was he who stormed past her.

He needed to calm down, needed to release the rage he felt when she tried to dismiss him. The cold wind whipped his face and stung his eyes as he walked to the end of the veranda. It did little to ebb the fire burning inside him. His nostrils flared as he stared angrily over the sweeping hills of Kilkenny. All he had wanted to do was put her at ease, remove the haunted look in her eyes.

He humorlessly laughed at that, her eyes were no longer haunted. If they had been a pistol, he would be dead right now. What did the chit think she could possibly do to capture her father's murderers? It was insane for her to even think she could, and dangerous. That alone frightened him more than he was willing to admit. He would meet with her brothers tomorrow, perhaps they would have more tact in convincing her he was not leaving.

So wrapped up in his own thoughts, he had not heard his father approach. When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he whirled around braced for an attack. His father stepped back, palms raised in a non-confrontational gesture. "Easy there boy, 'tis only me. I saw your little exchange with Samantha. Are you alright?"

"She has got to be the most infuriating person I have ever had the displeasure of meeting. She dismissed me, can you believe the gall? Says she can handle this situation and I should not worry myself. I was free to go."

"Technically you are."

"The hell I am. You were not there when she was being man-handled on the street or when our carriage was attacked. These people mean business and they would not think twice about removing anyone who stood in their way." In disgust he turned back to the railing and leaned his hands heavily upon it. This time Christian did not flinch when he felt his father's hand on his shoulder.

Thankful his son's back was turned so he could not see the smile which played upon his lips, he said, "She has inherited her father's sense of duty as well as his protective nature. Did you know Nathaniel practically sequestered the six of them, severing all ties with their extended family? Not because of any family riff, but because he knew their link to him would put them in danger. He could manage to protect his wife and children, but not if he had to worry about everyone else as well. Are you sure there is not more behind her protestations than simple pride?"

Anger deflated, his shoulders sagged, "I do not know what to think. One minute she looks so frail, like a mild wind would surely topple her, then the next she is standing there like a warrior princess, eyes shooting daggers at me. One minute I want to comfort her, protect her and the next I feel like I need to run for cover."

Graydon did let the chuckle loose this time, "Sounds like she

will be keeping you on your toes son.” Before he could bristle at the comment, Graydon continued, “Have you spoken with her brothers yet?”

“No, I thought I should wait until tomorrow. Patrick and I can take a ride back here in the morning.”

“To keep Samantha out of earshot? Do you think that is wise? Personally I would have Liam and Séamas meet you at Briarwood Manor.”

He shot his father a look over his shoulder then hung his head, “You are right. Maybe the best way to protect her is not to let her out of my sight. In order to do that, I will need to include her. I do not like it one bit, but it may be the only way.”

“I knew you would see reason. Now, let us go inside. ‘tis colder than a witch’s heart out here.” He shivered to emphasize his point then gave his son a smile as they walked back to the house together.

He thought it best to avoid Samantha for the remainder of the morning. Now sitting across from her on their way back to Briarwood Manor, it was impossible. The tension in the carriage was palpable. Even the vicar looked uncomfortable, and he was a man usually oblivious to his surroundings.

When they arrived, Graydon exited the coach first followed by his son. Christian then turned to help Samantha out when a blood curdling scream came from within the house. Not thinking, he shoved Samantha back into the carriage, told her to stay and slammed the door into her face causing her to stumble ungraciously into the vicar. She bit back on a stream of oaths, by the time she had righted herself, he was already mounting the stairs to her home, his father right alongside.

What did he think she was, a dog? *Stay my ear, this is my home.* She scrambled out of the carriage and into the house, only to come to a screeching halt when her fury ebbed and her vision cleared. She stared agape at the total and utter devastation. In the parlor to the left, the small cherry writing desk had been ransacked, the papers within strewn all over the floor. The two wing backed chairs had been slashed, the stuffing from their cushions and the throw pillows now littered the floor like snow.

Tables were overturned, portraits smashed, their canvases pried away from their frames. Mrs. Avery stood weeping inconsolably in the midst of the mêlée. Shocked by the scene, Samantha backed out of the room, desperate to see if the carnage was isolated or wide spread. She picked her way over the debris in the foyer to her father's study. The room was hardly recognizable. She turned to race from the room and barreled into a hard unmovable blockade. Christian's arms darted out to steady her, her eyes were wild and unseeing. He shook her once to get her to focus on what he was saying, "You cannot run through the house."

“I have to see, I have to...”

“We do not know if whoever did this is still here or if they have left. I will take you with me but you are not to enter a room until I say it is clear for you to do so. Are we clear?” His grip tightened on her arms forcing her to acknowledge and agree to what he told her. “Are we clear?” When she nodded he took her hand and led her to the next room down the hall.

After a quick glance around ensuring the safety of the room, he stepped aside to let Samantha see. It was the ladies’ solace, a tiny room which adjoined the ballroom through another door on the far side. The room had contained several settees, a Cheval mirror, a wash basin and stand, some lovely tall vases with flowers as well as some paintings that hung on the walls and an oriental silk screen, now all was left was a pile of rubble in the center of the room.

They could hear footsteps of the others going to the second floor, so they turned and headed down the hall to the library. He pressed her against the wall near the doors, “This room is much larger than the solace so it will take a few moments to make sure the room is secure. Can I trust you to wait here for me and not to come in?”

She stared into those smoky grey eyes, wanting to reach out to him, wanting to tell him to take care. She merely lowered her gaze to the middle of his chest and nodded meekly. He had seen the look in her eyes, the shock, the anger and then the worry. It was the latter which unnerved him the most. Although he imagined himself being fanciful, he would swear the worry was for him and his safety as opposed to what had happened. Satisfied she would stay put, he silently entered the room and surveyed the damage. This room looked in worse shape than the previous three. Not a single book remained on the shelves most with their pages torn out completely, not one piece of furniture remained intact.

He had just searched the last of the three alcoves when he heard a noise. Senses on full alert he made his way toward the fireplace. On the floor in front of the hearth laid Titus, unconscious with a small bloody gash on the back of his head, undoubtedly from the fire poker which lay on the floor beside him. Christian took one last look around the room, satisfied it was safe bellowed for Samantha.

She was startled when she heard his voice, heart pounding she rushed in the room. He was crouched down in front of the hearth.

*Was he hurt? Was something wrong?* The icy fingers of panic squeezed at her innards. Then he looked at her and she dispelled an audible sigh of relief.

Maybe he was not being so fanciful after all, "Please come here and give me a hand. 'Tis Titus, he has been hurt."

"Oh," she gasped when she reached his side. "Is he dead?" She could not tell if his chest was rising and falling.

"He will have a ferocious headache for a few days, but he shall live." He looked around in disgust, there was not a suitable place for him to be able to lay the boy. "See if you can find a pillow or something so we can prop up his head. While you are at it, give a shout for someone to bring us some rags and water so I can clean him up."

She went to the door first and shouted for Mr. Avery to bring her the things Christian requested, then she looked around the room for his first request. Like in the other rooms, every cushion and pillow had been gutted, so she opted for gathering up one of the curtains which had been torn down. She deftly folded it into a square and went to offer it for Titus' use.

Mr. Avery arrived with a bowl of water, the rags and bandages his mistress asked for, and although he hesitated at the sight of the room, he entered quickly, Graydon following in his wake. Christian cleaned the excess blood around Titus' cut, bandaged his head, then rolled him onto the pillow of drapes Samantha had gathered. The boy groaned at the movement then slowly woke. His vision cleared to the relieved smiling face of Samantha. He looked from her to Christian's menacing scowl then to Graydon's matching one. He tried to rise only to have a firm hand push him back down. "So much for being part of the action but not part of the danger, huh son. What happened?"

Titus furrowed his brow and answered Graydon, "I decided to take your offer and spend an extra night since the boat would not be leaving until tomorrow afternoon. I poured myself a cup of tea, then could not resist the calling of all these lovely books. I placed my cup on the table and started to peruse the selection." He knit his brows in concentration, "I am sorry, that is all I can remember."

"What time was it when you came into the library?" Christian asked.



He thought a moment, "It must not have been quite nine. I do not recall the clock chiming the hour."

Graydon and Christian exchanged glances, "There is entirely too much destruction to be accomplished by just one or two men in three hours. What does the rest of the house look like?"

"Pretty much the same, except the kitchen and the servant's quarters, they were untouched, looks like we will all be spending the night at Killarn." Graydon took pity on the very confused looking Titus, "While you were napping, the house was completely ransacked. There is not a piece of furniture, a painting, a pillow, a mattress, a drawer that has remained untouched. 'Tis obvious they were looking for something...question is, did they find it?"

"No, they have not found it." All eyes were on Samantha. She was ghostly pale, staring off into nothing.

Christian tensed then forcing himself to calm. Very quietly he asked, "Do you know where the list is? Can you see it?"

"No, I just know it is not in this house." Her eyes focused and she looked directly at Titus. "'Tis not in any house." He swallowed audibly. "I am sorry you were hurt." She continued. "When you feel steady I will have someone on my staff bring you to the inn near the dock. You will be better able to rest without all the noise that will be going on here. Again I apologize for your unfortunate mishap."

She rose, "Come Mr. Avery, there is much work to be done. Have Patrick send Arianna and the children back to my grandparents, then tell him I said to roll up his sleeves, he can start in Father's study. We will start in the parlor and you can assemble a crew for the library. Have Mrs. Avery bring the ladies upstairs..."

Christian stared long after her voice faded away, then narrowed his eyes on Titus making the boy squirm. Graydon cleared his throat, "Well young man, I strongly suggest if you ever visit this place again you take care not to get injured, the mistress of the house does not care for it overly much."

With an obvious look of relief, Titus replied, "Yes Sir. I will Sir."

"Can you sit?"

"I believe so," and he did with only a slight sway.

"Good, stay there a moment before you try to stand." He looked at his son, "You will handle things while I take our friend here to the inn? No sense in distressing Samantha any more than she already is. I will meet you at Killarn, should be able to make it back by supper I should say." Christian quirked a brow but did not question, gave a nod and left to find Samantha.

She was standing in the parlor smiling at a young boy who had just righted the desk for her. "Thank you Michael, as for the rest of this mess I am thinking you might need a rake." The boy's eyes got wide before he started to giggle at the concept. Samantha chuckled too, "You laugh my good man, but have you any better ideas? If we tried doing this by hand we would not finish in a month's worth of Sundays. There are feathers everywhere!" She threw out her arms to emphasize her point, gaining a fresh set of giggles from her young charge.

He snorted once and gasped twice before he could answer, "Yes Miss Samantha, a month of Sundays." He was holding his sides as he left the room to fetch something a bit more suitable to clean up the mess than a rake.

"You seem to be taking this well."

Still smiling she turned toward Christian, "What good would it do if I were upset? That child was pale and shaking when he came in here and saw the mess, now he is looking at this as an adventure. Now if his grandmother would pull herself together..."

"Grandmother? No, let me guess, Mrs. Avery?" Now it was his turn to smile.

"Her two sons and their families live on the estate. Her daughter and son-in-law are with my brothers."

"You like keeping families together I see."

"The Prichards and Averys have been together for several generations and we intend to keep it that way."

The family history she so craved, he mused. Perhaps that little tidbit of information would be helpful to Uncle Albert. He would wait until later to press her on the scene in the library, for surely there

was more than she let on. He smiled, shook out of his jacket and tossed it in the corner, then proceeded to roll up his sleeves. When she gave him a questioning look he said, “Well, where do you want me to start?”

After four hours of non-stop work, the parlor was starting to resemble its former self. Michael, bless his heart and clever mind, suggested they roll the rugs, trapping a majority of the mess inside, then remove the entire rug from the room so they could work without feathers and fluff flying around. So after picking through to retrieve the papers which used to reside in the writing desk, and moving the furniture to the periphery of the room, they did just that, and it worked surprisingly well.

Arianna and the children did return to Killarn and within the hour of her departure, Liam, Séamas, Mr. Peterson and a hefty number of staff arrived to help. The rage she had seen in her brothers' eyes was chilling, however they each kept their tempers in check and concentrated at the monstrous task at hand. A mixed blessing for sure, for now their anger was left to fester until this evening when, after dinner, they would hold a family meeting. She knew at that time she would need to recount her little episode in the library, she hoped by then she would understand it enough to be able to explain.

Samantha sat back on her feet. She had been kneeling in front of a small bookcase replacing some undamaged books when Mr. Peterson came into the room to inspect the furniture and such. Meticulously he inspected each piece making notes as to the work and supplies needed. He sorted the portrait frames into salvageable, repairable and beyond a prayer, giving the last to Michael to add to the growing heap on the rear veranda. The ones which were in good enough shape, he re-secured and re-hung. The small act of having pictures on the wall went a long way to making the room presentable again.

Christian watched Samantha watch Mr. Peterson. She was pale. Multiple tendrils had escaped the simple knot on her head and were now hanging limply around her face. She was holding her injured wrist to her breast and absently massaging her fingers. She was exhausted, both physically and emotionally and it showed. He

walked over to her, cupped her elbow and helped her to her feet. "Come, you are finished."

She protested. "I have hardly started. There is so much..."

He rubbed her arms from elbow to shoulder in slow comforting strokes, "And it will still be here tomorrow. You have done more than enough for one day, more than any gently bred lady I have ever met, with the exception of some in my family, would do in a year's time." His stare silenced her rebuttal, "We will go to your brothers' where you can have a nice long bath and a nap before supper. Chances are this will not be an early evening for any of us."

A bath and a bed sounded like heaven. "Let me go tell Mrs. Avery," she sighed, suddenly bone weary.

He gave her arms a squeeze and kissed her brow, "And I will speak to your brother, then meet you at the carriage." He retrieved his discarded jacket and picked his way to the study. Yes, there was still much work to be done.

Patrick was standing behind his father's desk, raking his hands through his hair, looking every bit as tired as his sister. Stacks and stacks of paper covered the Boule top. It was heart wrenching to see the exquisite piece had been marred by sadistic hands. The tortoiseshell and brass marquetry on the drawer fronts were chipped from being tossed carelessly to the floor, the walnut veneer cracked and one of the eight hand carved legs sustained an angry gash when the desk had been toppled. "I am taking your sister back to Killarn. Why not come with us? Séamas and Liam left almost an hour ago, and you look spent."

Patrick let out an exasperated breath, closed his eyes, reached his hands behind his neck to pinch away some of the tension, then shook his head. He opened his eyes and looked at Christian, "Father somehow always managed to shield us from his work and its inherent dangers. It is not that he had us sequestered but he kept his two lives separate. I am sure that is why we live in Kilkenny as opposed to London.

"This house was built on Killarn land, its acreage a wedding gift from my grandparents. The Wallingfords and the O'Tooles were school friends of my mother's, had been friends since they were in diapers. The staff has been around since before I was born and those who are not are descendants of those who were. Your uncle was the

only other my father brought into his inner sanctum, and he could hardly be called an outsider considering he too had been a friend since childhood as well.

“Growing up, we each had school friends who would come over. If perchance one would ask what our father did, our planned answer would be he was an archeologist, somewhat mysterious and no need to explain his extended absences or the unusual trinkets around our home that he had gathered from the corners of the globe.

“With the exception of the occasional assistance Samantha gave, none of us were involved with our father’s line of work.” His stare bore into Christian’s, “So why now? Why when he has gone, we need to deal with this as well? Somehow, some way, someone has breached this intricately spun cocoon my father has woven around us, but who?”

“I cannot answer that now, but rest assured I will. Your main concern right now is Arianna and the children. You should take them home and let your brothers and myself deal with this mess.”

Fire shot into Patrick’s eyes as he silently stood measuring Christian, then he let out a haggard breath and sat in what remained of his father’s leather desk chair. He looked defeated, torn between which part of his family needed the most protection.

“I shall guard her with my life. I give you my word.”

Patrick recognized the sincerity of his statement and it brought marginal comfort. “We will leave in the morning.”

“I will arrange it so you will have added protection.”

“Do you feel it necessary? Wales is far removed from here.” He rebuffed, not liking the idea of someone still being able to touch his family so far away.

“As far as Kilkenny is from London?” Christian countered.

“Very well.” He rose and the men shook hands. “Since I will not be around on the morrow, I will stay and accomplish what I can now. Please tell Arianna I will see her and the children at supper.”

Christian nodded and left. To his surprise, Samantha was waiting for him on the front steps. “‘Tis freezing out here, you will

catch your death.” He scolded.

“I needed some air, some quiet time to think.” Her voice hitched. In two strides he was at her side turning her into his arms. He gathered her close, pressed her head to his shoulder and soothingly stroked her back. His tenderness was her undoing and the dam broke, she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest.

He struggled to decipher a long stream of nearly undistinguishable statements intermixed with sobs, then attempted to address the few he managed to comprehend, “Yes it was fortunate the children were not in the house, but my instincts tell me the people who did this knew full well when the house would be empty. I have convinced Patrick to take Arianna and the children home tomorrow, so you need not fear for their safety. They will be well guarded tonight as well as on their journey home.” She sniffled and nodded her head against his chest.

He placed his fingers under her chin and gently forced her to look up at him, “And finally, you were well distracted throughout the day to sense anything. It was only items in the house which were destroyed, and unlike people, items can be replaced or simply done without. With the exception of Titus, no one was hurt and his injury was minimal at best.” He was itching to question her on what happened in the library, but he did not have the heart when he looked into her troubled eyes. He brushed away her tears and lightly kissed her on the forehead, “You still need that bit of fresh air?”

She gave him a questioning look then a little squeak when he lifted her high in his arms. She should have protested, would have too if she had not felt so protected in his strong arms, so instead she loosely draped her arms around his neck and settled her head on his shoulder. At that moment, she would have gone to the ends of the earth with him as long as he did not stop holding her, with a sigh, she relaxed fully into his strength.

He hoisted her onto one of the saddled horses, then in one fluid motion mounted behind and settled her comfortably on his lap. “Ready?” She nodded as he nudged the speckled grey stallion into a walk. When they cleared the paddocks their speed increased so she wrapped her arms more tightly around him. The freed tendrils of her hair danced playfully in the crisp breeze, tickling his face, tantalizing his nostrils with her distinctive scent, a scent of which he could not seem to get enough. She fit so perfectly in his arms, he found himself

wishing the trip between the two houses was not such a short distance. He liked the feel of her slight weight on him.

In his mind's eye, he pictured what she would feel like wrapped around him so without the barrier of clothes standing between them, and he started to stir. With a muffled growl he kicked the horse into full gallop, he needed to get her off of his lap and now. The added speed only accomplished her clinging tighter.

He did not slow until he was practically at the front steps. He halted the horse, squeezed his eyes closed a moment and swallowed, then dismounted and plucked her off the horse by her hips. She slid the full length of him on her descent to the ground. When her feet touched, her knees buckled causing her to lean more fully on him. In an effort to save them both from embarrassment, Christian swept her back into his arms and carried her to the house, thankful her flowing skirt hid his obvious predicament.

As he reached the top step the door flew open. Worry mixed with anger evident on Liam's face, "Is she alright?"

"Nothing a hot bath and a few hours rest will not cure." He assured.

"I can take her."

Christian strode past him, "Which room?"

Liam hesitated, he did not know this man who was so brazenly taking liberties with his sister and he was not quite sure he liked it or him for that matter. He looked at Samantha. Her arms were draped loosely around Christian's neck, her head on his shoulder, her face nuzzled into the crook of his neck and her eyes were closed. In fact, he was not sure if she was not asleep. Samantha had always been on the timid side, never trusting, wary of strangers, she was obviously comfortable with this man. He relented, "Third on the left."

"Would you send someone up with a hot bath and to help her?" When he nodded, Christian added over his shoulder, "I will be down as soon as she is settled."

The door was ajar allowing him to easily nudge it open with his foot and enter the room. He looked around for the best place to put Samantha down. He quickly dismissed the bed as an option, forcefully tamping down the images which flooded his mind at the



sight of the expansive four-poster. The chair by the hearth would have to do.

When he reached it and started to lower her, her arms tightened around his neck. He wondered if she realized how difficult she was making this for him, then mentally shook himself, knowing full well there was not an unabashed bone in the woman's body. Silently praying for strength, he sat with her on his lap.

"I was not ready to let go just yet." She whispered making him smile.

He hugged her lightly, "Quite alright. You rest until they come with your bath." His smile faded when he felt her shoulders shake. Lord he hated when she cried, "Shh, it is alright." He cooed as he pressed his lip to the top of her head then froze when he heard the tiniest giggle escape her. He leaned her away from him so he could see her face but she kept her head down. Placing a finger under her chin, he forced her to look up.

Her golden eyes danced as she bit down hard on her lower lip trying unsuccessfully to contain her mirth. With a valiant effort he squashed the wave of embarrassment he felt starting to rise within him. Had she noticed his lack of control? He released the breath he had been holding when she blurted, "I wish I could have seen my brother's face when you swept in here with me in your arms telling him what to do. Liam's not one to stand by idle while someone else calls the shots." She gave in to a full fit of giggles.

He let out a sigh, "Playing possum were you?" He chuckled as she reburied her face into his chest. He stood then settled her into the chair he vacated. "I can hear them coming up the stairs." He told her as he stooped in front of her. "Get cleaned up and get some rest. I will see you at supper." He pressed a kiss to her forehead just before the servants entered the room with her bath, then left.

Arianna, as she entered the dining hall, explained Dylan and Emily had had an entirely too eventful day and were already in bed, so they would not be joining the family for supper, Patrick had arrived and went upstairs to freshen up and to kiss his children good night, and he would be joining them in a few minutes. Graydon entered the room shortly after Arianna, his hair still damp from his bath. He made his way to where his son and the Prichard boys were standing near the sideboard.

“Brandy?” Séamas offered. Graydon nodded, taking the glass from him. “Did you get Titus settled?”

“He will be spending three days at the inn, then head back with Morris to London.”

“I thought they were leaving in the morning.” Christian stated.

His father shook his head as he took a sip of his drink. “They are not departing as previously scheduled. Seems Morris does not want to leave his new wife straight away.”

“Oh how wonderful!” Samantha exclaimed as she strode into the room. “And so fast. He only proposed yesterday!”

All eyes turned toward her. She had entered the room while they were talking and no one had noticed her arrival. Christian noted she was pale, but definitely looked better than when he had left her earlier. Her attire was that of comfort, not fashion. She had donned a simple dress in the palest grey, a matching ribbon secured her glorious hair at the nape of her neck allowing the remainder to simply cascade down her back. Her large golden eyes, fringed by sooty lashes stood out against her porcelain skin, making her look very young and fragile, and in Christian’s opinion, never more lovely. He smiled as she came to stand next to him.

“Have they married already?” She asked

“By special license, first thing tomorrow morning,” Graydon supplied. “He will have a meager two days to spend with his wife before he sets sail. Luckily he will be returning in a se’ennight so their separation will be minimal.”

“I shall pen them a note in the morning, wishing them well.”

“Forever finding the joy within the misery, big sister.” Séamas teased as he gave her shoulder a squeeze and planted a kiss on top of her head.

She smiled up at her “little” brother though her eyes were sad, “We need to take it when and where we can.” In what seemed to be a blink of an eye, he had transformed from a scrawny lad into the full grown man who now towered over her. How they had all changed, she thought, gone forever were their carefree days of youth.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Patrick announced as he entered the room, now clean-shaven and hair slicked back from his bath. He smiled at his wife, “The clann are well into their dreams.”

“They were asleep afore their heads hit their pillows, I am sure.” Arianna reached out her hand to her husband as he crossed the room to kiss her cheek. The look which passed between them showed all the shared love and admiration the couple felt for each other. Without releasing his wife’s hand, he turned to the group, “Come, it has been a long day for everyone and I think I can say with confidence you are probably as famished as I.”

His comment was met with chuckles and confirming nods, and for one fleeting moment all seemed normal, family and friends sitting down to a meal. Silently Patrick sat at the head of the long table with Arianna to his left, Liam to her left and Séamas across. Christian held the chair next to her youngest brother for Samantha to take before he settled next to her, leaving Graydon to choose between the chair next to Liam or the one opposite Patrick. The eldest Prichard made the decision easy. “Please Graydon, take the head ... ‘tis only right the most senior member in the room should have it.”

Shocked eyes turned toward Patrick, but Graydon noticed the twinkle in the younger man’s eyes, silently applauding him for an avenue to release some of the building tension in the room. He let loose a heartfelt guffaw, “Aye, and more senior by the day so it would

seem.” The room visibly relaxed at the good-natured banter between the two. The sentiment carried through the meal, as if by unwritten word all knew which topic was taboo until supper had concluded.

When the meal had been cleared, the men had elected to receive their after dinner drinks where they sat and the staff had been dismissed. The conversation abruptly ceased. All knowing what needed to be discussed, none wanting to start the conversation. Finally Patrick spoke, “Arianna, the children and I will be leaving first thing in the morning.” He eyed his brothers. “I need to ensure their safety. It will be but a few days before I can return. Think you two can manage to keep the hounds of hell at bay until I do?”

“As much as you like to tease brother, mischief has not followed us around for a goodly number of years.” Liam admonished.

“Ah, but I also know you like no other, and there are still too many times when your tempers flare quicker than your senses.” He stared at them pointedly. “This is no ordinary situation we find ourselves in, and the opposition is playing for keeps. You have seen firsthand what they are capable of...”

As Patrick’s voice trailed off, Christian spoke. “I speak from experience when I say these men will stop at nothing. I also cannot stress enough how many lives would be at stake if they were to succeed.” He paused as if weighing the best possible phrasing for his next line of questioning.

Graydon sensing his dilemma gently prodded, “Samantha, when we were in the library you said the list was not in the house, that it was not in any house.” He let the statement hang.

Taking a breath she met his stare, “I saw the list in my hands. I was kneeling and there was wind in my hair.”

“Could it have been near an open window?”

“No,” she shook her head staring past him to an obscure spot on the wall. “I could feel an openness, I was not confined by walls.” Her eyes focused on him, beseeching him to understand.

“Fair enough. So your father hid the list outside somewhere between here and London.” Graydon’s shoulders shook in a humorless chuckle, for the first time revealing the tension he was feeling by rubbing the back of his neck. “At least it is reassuring the men looking

for the list will not have any easier time at finding it than we will. Then again we still have the upper hand in that respect, do we not?"

He looked at Samantha and she gave him a weak smile. "Now my dear, about the other incident in the library..." Christian gave his father a questioning look. "I have never witnessed you to be anything but the epitome of graciousness and decorum, however your mannerisms toward poor Titus bordered on rude. Why the sudden change?"

"I, I..." she faltered.

"Just a feeling?" He prompted and she nodded. "Well Samantha, I trust your instincts. That is why I got him out of your house as quickly as possible. The one thing I must ask though, was your fear for him, or from him?"

"I cannot be sure," was the only explanation she offered. How could she explain it was Titus' face she saw as the image of Judas Iscariot standing outside the Garden of Gethsemane? This imagery was something new to her, surely they would think she had gone daft.

Her paleness and stiff posture were the only confirmation Graydon needed to substantiate his suspicions. He made a mental note to speak to one of her brothers before the night was through. He cleared his throat, "I think we have all had enough of this for one evening, and it would behoove us all to be well rested. No telling what the morrow will bring." He rose, sliding his chair away from the table and the others followed suit.

As everyone made their way out of the dining room, Graydon placed a restraining hand on Liam's arm. "A word with you please?"

"Certainly."

They waited until the room had been completely vacated. "I need one of your most trusted men, but also someone who would not have come into contact with Titus at any time."

Without hesitation Liam supplied, "Jordon."

"Hopefully he has no aversion to sea travel."

"None what-so-ever, and his absence would not seem unusual. We often have him traveling for us for business for days at a

time. Shall I fetch him?”

“Just like that? No questions as to the reason behind my request?”

“Sir Aaron would not have sent you to us if there was any question. I would lay my own life as well as the lives of my family in his hands, I know the same can be said with you.”

“My son and I will do all we can to protect you and yours.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Liam turned and left, leaving Graydon with the weight of the world on his chest.

Instead of heading upstairs, Samantha grabbed her cloak from the peg and headed out the front door. She had not made it down two steps before she felt her hand being drawn into the crook of Christian's arm as he fell in step beside her. He never said a word, just curled his fingers around hers and matched her pace, allowing her to lead the way. The moon was high and bright, illuminating their way. Several minutes passed before she broke the silence. "I needed some air."

"Hmm."

"I would not have been able to sleep if I went up straight away."

"Understandable."

"You really do not need to worry, I do not want to put you out." She protested but made no move to remove her hand from his arm.

"You are not putting me out, and I can choose to worry if I want. Frankly, I was contemplating taking a walk myself. You just nudged my decision." He smiled at her. "I do not like him you know."

She furrowed her eyebrows then looked at him, "Who?"

"Titus. Never did. Always seemed too squirrely to me. The man has never done anything to warrant my feelings, but nonetheless, I do not care for him."

"I hated feeling what I did. He has always been nothing but polite and friendly towards me. My father liked him."

He stopped and turned her toward him. "Your father liked him?"

"I am not sure I should say liked exactly, but they were amicable."

"How often was Titus here?"

"At least once a month for the past two or so years. He would bring correspondences between my father and your uncle." She paused, then as if a light shone brightly, she exclaimed, "Oh you could not possibly think...but he is one of your uncle's men!"

He raised his hands to her shoulders, "Let us not jump to any conclusions, but at this point in the game we need to look at everyone as suspect."

A shiver of apprehension climbed up her spine, her eyes luminous orbs in the moon light. Muttering an oath beneath his breath, he pulled her into his arms. "It was not my intent to frighten you."

Engulfed in his warmth she did not feel frightened, she felt protected, cherished, fanciful feelings for sure. He had taken on the role of protector, nothing more. The sooner she would get that into her mind the better the chance of coming out of this unscathed, although, if she were to be honest with herself, she was far beyond that point already.

*Dear God, how could I let my feelings get this far out of hand? It was sheer lunacy. In a matter of days, weeks at most, he would be gone, and where would that leave me? Right where I deserved to be for being so foolhardy, that's where. Oh, but to be wrapped in his embrace felt so wonderful. The scent of him, the feel of him, so strong and completely male, I will revel in it now while he is here and worry about his leaving when the time comes.*

He felt the change in her, at first she was stiff with fright in his arms, now she was relaxed, nearly melting into him. He gritted his teeth when her slender arms wrapped around his waist and she snuggled her face into his chest. He did not bring her to this secluded area to take advantage of her, she has been through so much, the last thing she needed was the likes of him, but she felt so good. She fit to him so perfectly as if she were made just for him. Her soft scent enveloped him, tantalized him, and clouded his senses.

Samantha felt his stomach muscles clench, felt him swallow and she looked up at him. Slowly she moved her arms from around his



waist, slid them up his chest then draped them behind his neck. With more bravery than she thought she possessed, she whispered, "Please kiss me Christian. With all the horrors that have been going on the past few days, I need to feel there is something good and wonderful left in the world. Please?"

This woman was going to be his undoing for sure, but how could he possibly deny her request when it was all he could think about since the last time they touched? His hand slid up her back and into her hair, massaging the back of her head. The glorious feeling made her head lean back into his touch. He started to lower his head then hesitated.

She watched his jaw clench, the moonlight cast his face into planes and shadows, his eyes darkened. "Please." She whispered again. She could not be sure if the sound he made was a groan or a growl as he bridged the breath of distance between their lips. This kiss held none of the gentle sweetness of the prior one as his mouth crushed hers. The pleasure-pain was such a shock she gasped, opening her mouth slightly. It was the only invitation he needed and his tongue slipped between her parted lips. His passion fogged brain registered her stiffen and he immediately pulled back.

"Kiss me back," he whispered huskily. She brushed her lips over his. "Now open your mouth for me."

When she did, he slowly let his tongue slide in, stroking hers. Her head swam, never would she have imagined people kiss thus so. It could not be proper, but at the moment she was willing to throw proper to the wind for the sensations he was evoking were nothing she had ever experienced. Tentatively she allowed her tongue to touch his, instantly eliciting a groan from him. The primitive sound emboldened her to try it again.

She was rewarded by him slanting his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer. How she wished to be free of the splint so both her hands could luxuriate in the feel of his silky hair. Her blood coursed. Her heart pounded. She could not get close enough. She wanted to pull him tighter, to absorb him. She wanted, she wanted, she did not know what she wanted, she just knew she needed more.

Be it the hoot of the owl or the wispy yet crisp breeze which blew passed, something brought Christian to his senses and he gentled the kiss. When he would have broken the link between them, she

tugged him back. How easy it would be for him to succumb to her unknowing invitation, but taking her in the middle of a field in the freezing cold was not his idea of the proper induction to the ways between a man and a woman.

He pulled away slowly, soothing his retreat with small playful kisses as he spoke, "Easy love. We need to slow down, for you are a lady, and I, for reasons that escape me at the moment, am a gentleman. We cannot very well continue as we are without you becoming duly compromised."

She groaned, "I do not give a fig," still held securely within the grip of passion.

He chuckled, "But you will in the morning. Now, I will see you to the door..." He told her. "Then I shall subject myself to some strenuous exercise," he muttered beneath his breath.

He led her to the front door, gave her a chaste peck on the cheek, told her he would see her in the morning, opened the door, scooted her inside, closed the door and strode away. Samantha was left blinking at the closed door. She hung her cloak and reluctantly climbed the stairs to her room. There was even less chance now she would be able to sleep than there was before her walk.

The night was balmy, the waters blessedly calm after nearly a week of gales. The galley, cleared of all crewmen, was now filled with the officers from twenty-seven of England's most powerful warships, a risky proposition for sure, but vital nonetheless. The Admiral and his secretary, Mr. Scott, stood calmly in the center of the room, none of the pre-battle excitement displayed on previous missions evident in his demeanor.

All eyes were upon him as he spoke, "You have the battle plans, you know your mission. I have every confidence we will reign victorious. It is our profound duty to rid the world of this malignant lesion who would threaten our beloved home." He paused as he took the time to look into each and every set of eyes in the room. "There are many of us here who will not see the sun set on the morrow. I strongly suggest you each make peace with your maker and put your affairs in order. Most of all, know in your heart there is no greater honor than to give your life for your country."

Captain Tyler from the Tonnant, whom Sean and John were standing near, mumbled to Captain George Duff of the Mars, "Rather ominous do you not think?"

"Not one of his most rousing pep talks, I will give you that." Duff agreed.

Lieutenant Brice Gilliland from the Royal Sovereign snorted, "I cannot speak for any of ye, but I make my peace every night afore I lie down, Admiral Collingwood instilled that practice into our heads from when I was neigh a petty officer, he did." A grumble of affirmations followed his admission.

Captain John Cooke of the Bellerephon asked John Pilford, "So what do you think of this parallel formation the Admiral has us in?"

"Innovative, I can definitely say they will not be expecting it.

Think about it John, we are out shipped, out gunned and out manned, we need to take whatever upper hand we are afforded. A strategy such as this will separate their fleet, cause confusion, and allow us the advantage.”

“Glad to hear the younger captains are not questioning the Admiral’s unconventional wisdom,” his inference to Calder blatant. Captain Cooke smiled at John. “Horatio and I have a long history together. In all my days, I have never met a more intelligent man. His tactical prowess usurps the abilities of his predecessors as well as his enemies. And you young man,” he turned to Sean and slapped him on the shoulder. “I hear you were instrumental in pinpointing the whereabouts of the Spanish fleet. Well played son, well played.”

“Thank you Sir, I was just in the right place at the right time to hear their plans.”

Captain Cooke let out a boisterous hoot, “Such modest words from such an obviously self-assured man. I like this boy John. Where did you find him?”

“Sean has been a burr in my side since he was in knickers. He is Michael McCulloch’s younger brother.”

Captain Cooke’s eyes narrowed and he said somberly, “I should have recognized the family resemblance.” His voice became gruff, “That alone speaks for your inherent character. Michael was a good man and I have missed him sorely.”

“So have I.” Sean acknowledged. “Thank you Sir.”

The mention of Michael’s death proved the catalyst to disburse the group, now each drew into himself contemplating what would unfold before the next sundown and the fragility of life itself. Before midnight, the ships would be in formation with the Victory leading the Weather Column and the Royal Sovereign leading the Lee Column, full sail toward Cadiz and the French-Spanish fleet. The Ajax was stationed fourth in line behind the Leviathan in the Weather Column.

As John and Sean made their way back to their ship, John spoke, “If something should happen to me, would you look in on Celia and the boys from time to time? I have no fear for myself, for this is the life I have chosen and I am resigned to whatever consequences it may bring, but in times such as this I worry how they will manage ...”

Sean stared at his friend's solemn face, "I would have even if you had not asked. And I shall ask of you my friend, if something should happen to me, please get word to Christian Bradford. He is the closest I have to family and probably the only one who would mourn my passing anyway."

John smiled, "As if that were true, but I will honor your wishes. You have my word."

The next several days passed in a blur for Samantha, daylight hours spent trying to put her house to rights, evenings she would collapse into bed from sheer exhaustion. Thankfully no baleful acts befell either household during those days. When they were not helping at Briarwood Manor, Graydon and Christian were pouring over files sent from Aaron in the study at Killarn, on several occasions they called on Séamas and Liam for their opinions on possible theories they had.

A week after her father's funeral and the subsequent sabotage of her home, Samantha declared it habitable. The debris had been removed, the mattresses had been restuffed or replaced and enough of the furniture had been repaired so they could comfortably function in the house once more.

"I love my grandparent's house, but I yearn for my own bed in my own room." Samantha complained wearily as they finished their last dinner at Killarn.

"Cannot say I blame you my dear, I would feel the same. And I must commend you on the indefatigable gumption you exhibited in restoring your home, you were doing the work of three." Graydon complimented.

She dismissed his praise, "If it was your home you would have done the same. I would like to thank you, both of you, for all the help you have given. It truly goes above beyond your duties."

"Think nothing of it, 'twas our pleasure."

"I must apologize, the house has consumed so much of my time, I have not asked how things were panning out with the files from London."

Christian and his father exchanged glances. Upon Graydon's nod Christian spoke up, "Actually, I am glad you asked. If you are not

too tired, we would like for you to look at a few things we have isolated.”

“I do not know what input I could possibly give you, but of course I will be happy to look. I really was not privy to much of my father’s work.”

“Perhaps Christian should have said we could use your insight.” Liam supplied.

She glanced at her brother then at Séamas, both gave her an encouraging nod. “If you think it will help.” She said quietly as she played with the dressing on her arm, which rested in her lap.

Her face had paled and her gaze was distant, Christian fought an almost overwhelming urge to fold her into his arms and comfort her, shield her from the ugliness. “Father, she has been through so much. Maybe we should wait until...”

“No, no Christian ‘tis alright, truly. I will be fine.” She interrupted, then gave him a weak smile of reassurance.

“If you are sure.” He confirmed.

“I am. Shall we?”

He eyed her a moment, torn between their need for her help and his need to shield her, before he rose to pull out her chair. He offered her his arm and escorted her into the study. Her brothers and his father followed. Once she was seated behind the desk, Christian leaned over her shoulder and opened a file in front of her.

Graydon had come around behind her as well and leaned on the edge of the desk, “In your father’s correspondences with my brother there are multiple cryptic references to the list as well as a journal, both of which he clearly states are securely hidden. I get the impression they are not in the same spot, but they are both here somewhere close.”

Graydon paused until she looked up at him, “Samantha, I know this is difficult, but if per chance you can read over the files and pick up on something, anything we may have missed, it would be helpful. You were the one closest to your father, even if not by heart definitely by proximity. Something in the way he danced around the information might make more sense to you, where to us, not knowing

him, we would not pick up on the clues.”

He straightened from his leaning position then impulsively gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I think it best if we leave you to read over the files on your own. If you need anything, we will not be far.” He turned and looked pointedly at Liam and Séamas who were seated in the chairs in front of the desk.

Without realizing, Samantha reached for Christian’s hand which was resting protectively on her shoulder. “Father, I shall stay in case she has any questions.”

“Very well, but let her come to her own conclusions. This whole exercise was to get a fresh view point, I do not want hers clouded by our speculations.”

“Understood,” he confirmed. He patted her hand then strode around the desk, snatched another file off the desk as he went, then settle into a seat one of her brothers had recently vacated. He opened the file and started to read. Sensing her eyes upon him, he looked up, smiled, then promptly went back to the file.

*Fine help you are*, she thought. Tentatively she reached for the first piece of paper in the file. Her eyes misted when she saw her father’s bold scrawling writing. The letter was dated nearly three years ago and spoke of the *“perilous journey on which we are embarking”*, Samantha surmised from the content, and what she knew now, her father and Sir Aaron were about to rescue Monsieur de la Rues from his hiding place in the mountains of France. There were scribbled notes in the margins of the letter, the twenty-seventh of April, Pierre, Briançon, she would assume from Sir Aaron. She digested the words, committed them to memory, then turned to the next letter.

*“Although our trek proved fruitful and our prize has been won, our journey has just started. This is a dangerous line we walk my friend, and for that I urge you to heed my word, trust no one. Those you do trust, tell them naught. If you care for them, ‘tis the only way to ensure their safety.”* His cryptic manner goes on from letter to letter, and although Sir Aaron’s notes in the margins add some insight, it would have been infinitely more helpful to be able to read his replies in their entirety. Frustrated, Samantha sat back in the chair and pinched her eyes shut.

She spoke for the first time in over two hours and her voice croaked. She cleared it and started again, “Did Patrick mention finding any letters when he straightened our father’s study?”



“No, he did not. How far have you gotten?”

Samantha picked up the letter she had been reading, “January of this year.”

“Flip to the one dated April or perhaps May.”

She raised an eyebrow at his suggestion and was about to claim fatigue, but the expectant look in his eyes had her comply.

*“This last occurrence made it blatantly obvious that these were not mere coincidences. I have taken action to secure my papers and the log. My heart will forever stand guard over the names and only insight will reveal the written word.”*

She blew out her breath and sat back again, “Nothing like a good riddle.”

“So nothing comes to mind?”

“Perhaps if I read the letters between January and this one...”

“Just more circles if you ask me.” Christian grumbled.

Samantha smiled at his exasperated expression, “Would it be alright to wait until morning? The words are starting to swim on the page before my eyes.”

His expression softened and he gave her a rueful grin, “I did not mean to push. I should have realized how exhausted you were.”

“Perhaps when I am home...” She tossed her hands in the air, not knowing how to finish the sentence. “Would you be willing to help me look?”

He stood, “Of course, but for now we will put the matter to rest. Up with you, you need some sleep.” He came around the desk and tugged her up. Placing her hand into the crook of his arm he asked, “How is your wrist feeling?”

“Hmm, oh, it does not bother me a’ tall and the bruises are almost completely faded. I was thinking of leaving it unwrapped in the morning.” When he frowned at her she continued, “I will not be doing any more physical work now that the house is straightened. It

should be fine.”

“I guess you would be the best judge of it, but do be cautious.” He conceded, though still not liking the idea.

“I promise, if it starts to bother me, I will rewrap it.” She placated. When she looked around, she was startled to find herself standing in front of her bedroom door, she did not recall the walk from the study. *I must be more tired than I thought*, she mused.

He turned toward her and raised both her hands to his lips and kissed them, never taking his eyes off hers. He murmured, “Until morning. Sleep well.” Then with more restraint than he thought he possessed, he turned and went to his own room and firmly shut the door behind him.

She stared at his closed door, willing her irregular heartbeat to return to normal. She had thought he was going to kiss her again, she had wanted him to, but he did not, and she found it unnerving. How could the man irritate her in one breath and inflame her in the next? She was convinced her mind had become befuddled, ‘twas the only explanation, she was certain.

The day dawned crisp and bright, surely a treat for these last days of October in Ireland, where rain, fog and mist were the norm. The peat fire in the hearth was a mere mound of smoldering ash, which allowed a chill to settle in the room. Her cheeks and nose were cold, but her body was warm. Nothing would have pleased her more than to be able to snuggle down beneath the covers and go back to sleep. Samantha stretched lazily beneath the feathered quilt. Tempting as it was, lying about simply would not do, although the house was back in order, there was still work she needed to attend.

Grudgingly she tossed the blankets off her and sat up then slid out of bed. Her bare feet padded across the icy wooden floor and she crouched to add more fuel to the fire, after a minimal amount of prodding the flames licked to life and their warmth started seeping through the room. She placed the pitcher near the hearth, for although invigorating, she had no yen for a cold cleaning this morning. Instead she sat herself in the chair nearest the fire and unbraided her hair, first combing through it with her fingers then her brush, absently rethinking the words her father had written.

*“My heart will forever stand guard over the names and only insight will reveal the written word.”*

A Ghrá mo Chroí, my heart's beloved, her father would call her mother, but if her mother was dead, how could she be guarding anything. Her passing was well before the creation of the list, and surely, for it would be a sin, her father would not have interrupted her eternal slumber to place the list in her care. Samantha would have noticed the ground disturbed for she visited her mother's grave nearly every week.

No, her father would not have done that. She tried to recall portraits of her mother, thinking he meant her image was guarding the list. There were but two, the one in her father's study at Briarwood, but it had been destroyed when the vandals tore it off the

wall, and one of her as a young girl here at Killarn in her old bedroom, now Séamas room.

Inspired, she rose from her chair, donned a silk wrap, and tiptoed down the hall to her brother's room. Quietly as she could, she poked her head inside, only to find the room empty. Leaving the door open, she went to the windows and drew the curtains, washing the room in light. On the wall, across from the armoire, the picture of her mother hung. She was sitting on a grassy knoll and judging from the flowers around her, it was mid-summer. The gentle breeze played with her hair as she looked into the distance, a hint of a smile danced upon her lips.

Samantha stared at the picture a moment before she spoke, "You were Da's heart, he said it often enough, so where are you guarding?" She reached out and stroked her fingers along the frame, lifted it off the nail and examined the canvas, thumped the wall behind where the picture was hung. Much to her consternation, there was nothing but what should be. With a sigh, she re-hung the portrait. Tracing her fingers over her mother's face she said, "I need your help, I cannot do it on my own."

All he could do was stare, his breath caught in his throat, his chest tight. There she stood in nothing more than a thin strip of material, hair cascading about in an enchanting disarray, backlit by the sun streaming in from the window. She looked almost ethereal, her sorrowful eyes upon the painting of a young girl, unmistakably her mother. His gut clenched at her words and he gave in to the urge to go to her.

She did not turn, she knew the moment he was there. He came up behind her and slid his hands around her waist, and pulled her against his chest. He did not speak, just held her there, chin resting on her head.

"I miss her terribly," she confessed after a few moments.

"She was lovely, you look so much like her."

"So everyone says." She paused and sighed. "I should have known it would not have been as simple as the list being behind the portrait. That would have made it as easy for anyone looking as it would have for me. I know somehow my mother is guarding it, I can feel it, I just do not know how."

“The grave?”

“The thought had come to me, but he would not have done that. Some things are sacred, no matter what the price.”

“I meant no offense.”

“None takin’. Hmm.” She stepped away from his embrace.

“What are you thinking?”

She wandered across the room then turned and looked back at the picture. “He said she was watching over it, did not he?” She furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. “The only thing she could be looking at is this armoire and the window.”

“Well then, what do you say we have a look? I will take high, you take low.” He suggested.

“A fine plan for sure.” They searched every nook and cranny of the armoire, above, below, and behind it. They removed the drawers but there was nothing attached behind or underneath them. Samantha gave him a bewildered look when he started thumping on the back and bottom of the now empty cabinet. “Hidden compartments,” he explained and continued with his inspection. Finding nothing, they reassembled the armoire and move on to the window. The pane and the drapes revealed nothing. Samantha leaned against the sill, crossed her arms over her chest and let out an exasperated breath.

“Do not let it upset you, you will figure it out.”

“How can you be so bloody sure?” Frustration had colored her cheeks and words as her eyes danced with annoyance.

Against his better judgment, he chuckled. “You are trying too hard. If we cannot find it, you can believe it is well and safe, and there it should be until it is meant for us to find it.”

“Been in Ireland a bloody week and yer startin’ to think like me damned brothers already.” Christian did not even attempt to hide his mirth. In the short time he has known Samantha, for the most part, she faithfully portrayed the image of a fine lady of the gentry. He had gotten her Irish up and was finding he enjoyed this side of her. Her delicate mouth was cursing him and all he could do was laugh,

infuriating her more, “You bleeding dolt!” She let out in a huff and whirled around to stare out the window. Her breath hissed out her clenched teeth, then she let out a gasp.

Containing his remaining chuckles, he asked, “What is it?” when she spun around again to look at her mother’s picture then back out the window. She grabbed him by the shirtfront and pulled him to the window with strength which belied her petite stature. She forced him to look out the window, “What do you see?”

“Pardon?”

“Look,” she pushed his shoulder so he would look back out the window. “What do you see.”

Truly not knowing where she was going with this, he sighed and started naming the things he saw, “A hedgerow, an old wagon, a magpie – well at least I think it is a magpie, I never was much good at identifying birds.”

“Forget the blasted bird, what else do you see?”

“How about you just tell me what I should be seeing and save us all from this little game, Hmm?”

“Urgh! There,” she pointed, “what do you see over there.”

In the distance, where she was pointing, on a knoll stood a solitary oak. “A tree, nothing but an old, fat, gnarled tree. What is so fascinating about a stupid...Wait, is that not the tree....”

“Yes, the tree where my parents are buried.”

“But you just said he would not disturb...”

“I am not saying he did,” she interrupted. *Men can be so dense at times.* “It could be hidden somewhere near their graves. You cannot deny, in the portrait, my mother is looking out the window at the tree.”

He could deny it, but instead he chose to humor her. She grabbed his arm and urged him toward the door, “Come, we need to see if it is there,” but he would not budge. In frustration, she spun around to glare at him. “Do you not want to come with me?”

“You are not going anywhere.”

“What do you mean I am not going anywhere?” She sputtered, “I will go anywhere I damn well choose and you shan’t be telling me otherwise.”

“Perhaps I should have said you are not going anywhere dressed like that.” He raised an eyebrow as he surveyed her attire.

She had completely forgotten how inappropriately dressed she was, and mortified, color flooded her face. She was only in her shift, a poor excuse for a robe and bare feet. *Oh what he must think of me.*

Hoping to save her further embarrassment, he said, “How about you go to your room and dress, and I shall meet you in the parlor.” He left the room and headed downstairs. It was not even half and eight and he felt like he needed a drink. Scrubbing his hand over his face then through his hair, he commended himself for maintaining his gentlemanly dignity while his thoughts had gone quite carnal. The image of her in that thin fabric clinging lovingly to her luscious curves had permanently scored his eyes.

Working next to him, she was completely oblivious of the tumultuous sensations she was evoking within him. It was all he could do to keep his mind, and actions, on the search she was conducting. He needed to place some distance between them. Perhaps he would speak with his father and, if they found the list, he would return it to London, leaving Graydon and Murphy to the task of ensuring the Prichard family’s safety.

Before the thought had chance to root, Samantha appeared, her hair pulled back from her face in a simple knot at her crown, clad in an unembellished chestnut morning gown, all thoughts of leaving her vanished. Although he preferred her earlier attire, she was quite fetching. She still had not recovered from her embarrassment and her eyes spoke as much.

He gathered her cloak and held it out for her, “Shall we?” He asked. She hesitated before she allowed him to wrap the garment over her shoulders. The cold blast which greeted her was startling, the bright sunshine misled her into thinking it would be a mild day. She pulled her cloak more snugly around her and determinedly set off toward the tree, and hopefully the answers to their unwanted mystery.





The first traces of dawn were licking the sky, spewing feathered daggers of pinks and oranges across the pristine azure. Twenty-seven warships in two rows traveled full sail toward Trafalgar. The night before, the Pickle schooner sailed the thirty leagues toward the British fleet to alert them the Spanish ships were attempting to leave the harbor of Cadiz.

At full light, all hands were on deck. Sean stood with John at the helm, eyes focused on the horizon. A pin-dot appeared then another, a shout rained down from the crow's nest, "At the ready!"

"Will not be long now my friend," John proclaimed absently.

"So it seems."

"Lest you not forget your promise."

"You have my word my friend." Sean ensured, "and I yours?"

John's guarantee came as a nod, then all his concentration focused on his crew as they drew closer to engagement with the Franco – Spanish fleet. The pregnant sails had them careening across the water and soon the horizontal line of the enemy across the mouth of the harbor was in clear view.

Word came down the line. The Victory had raised its signal flags, Lord Nelson's word to his fleet, "*England expects that every man will do his duty*". An invigorated sense of patriotism flowed through the crew, yet a sick buzz of anticipation was in the air. Each man prepared for battle in his own way, each knew this twenty-first day of October, in the Lord's year eighteen hundred and five, would go down in history. The only question was, who would be the victor?

It was half past twelve at noon when the first boom of the enemy's cannon ripped through the fleet, the projectile fell harmlessly with a splash, missing its intended target by a furlong or more. If only

they could be that lucky for the remainder of the skirmish, but it was wishful thinking at best. Several more shots were fired by the Spaniards only to be answered by Her Majesty's finest. Sean felt Ajax's first volley clear through his bones as the recoil shook all within the vicinity. The gunner's aim was true, they had drawn first blood. In rapid succession, a dozen more blasts rang out, surprisingly most contacting with deadly precision.

Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood led the southern squadron in the Royal Sovereign, his line of fifteen ships bisected the adversary's horizontal line at a right angle, separating their nemesis' fleet into two distinct groups. Though this exposed his fleet's broadside, the unusual tactic caught the Franco-Spanish fleet by surprise, affording the southern squadron the upper hand.

John and Sean witnessed Nelson engage Villeneuve's ship, the Bucentaure, himself, before all their attention was drawn to the San Francisco on their port and the Mont Blanc on their starboard. Luckily they were able to make short work of the Mont Blanc, one of only three ships which had slipped into the middle of the battle zone, it now bobbed aimlessly in the churning waters, disabled and burning.

The battle raged, the foray deadly. The smell of gunpowder and burning wood permeated the air, the sounds of screams and death echoed. The once crystal clear day was covered in a shroud of smoke. The minutes turned to hours, yet the Ajax held strong as the enemy faltered. The Mont Blanc had fallen with minimal effort as did the San Francisco and the Ravo, the Héros on the other hand was proving to be a challenge. John, calm and collected, squared his shoulders then shouted orders as he brought his ship around to engage. They were out gunned eighty-six to seventy-four, out manned by at least a hundred and ammunition was running low. His hearty men, now covered in blood, sweat and grim, maneuvered like a fine tuned clock, loaded the cannons, fired their guns, tamped the fires. Each focused on one goal, survival. He spared a glance at Sean, their eyes met, with the simple exchange each knew they would come out of this day victorious.

There was a deafening crash as a blast severed the top of the aft mast and it came crashing down on the deck, followed by the scream of the rear gunner as he lay pinned beneath the fallen rubble. Sean immediately left his station near John to assist the young man. With the aid of several crewmembers, they were able to free him. The boy's leg was badly broken and he had cuts and abrasions a plenty, but he would live. Sean ordered him taken below boards to be tended.

As he mounted the stairs to return to his post, there was another explosion followed by a searing pain, suddenly everything went black.

A frost had fallen the night before and even though the sun was high, the ground still crunched beneath Samantha's boots. The notion of a long cold winter flittered through her mind breaking into the disjointed array of thoughts presently vying for attention. Her determined, if not focused, strides brought her to her parent's gravesite in little time, certainly not enough time to sort out the fracas currently raging in her head. She stopped at the base of the tree to catch her breath, she closed her eyes and raised her fingers to her temples to try to ease the throbbing.

She sensed more than heard Christian's approach, veritable warmth at her back. How easy it would be to lean against him, draw his strength, lay her doubts, troubles and fears in his capable hands, but she reminded herself, this was not his battle to fight. She knew he had been assigned to protect her and she had no doubt of his abilities, however, until she unraveled her father's clues, he and his father could do little more than sit and wait.

She did not stiffen when she felt the strong hands on her shoulders, she did not have the strength to resist. She felt the solid length of him at her back, and just managed to suppress a shiver when his warm breath caressed her ear, "Lean against me and close your eyes." When she hesitated he added, "Trust me."

With a sigh, she complied. He felt her slight weight as she pressed back against his chest, albeit rigidly. "You are safe, no one can hurt you while I am with you." His husky baritone lulled her to relax. "Good. Now I want you to remember something, just keep in mind you are safe. We are back in the library at your home. We have discovered Titus. Can you picture it?" he felt her nod against his cheek. "You got an image of holding the list in your hands. You felt a breeze on your face. Are you there?" Again she nodded. "Take me with you, tell me what you see."

She took a shaky breath and began, "I am kneeling."

“On what?” he whispered.

“Grass, but it is hard and the ground is hard. The light is not very good, but I cannot be sure if it is dawn or dusk.”

“Look around. What else do you see?”

She gasped and stiffened. Her reaction was so quick, Christian could not prevent her from pulling away, but she did not run away, merely turned to look at him with wild eyes, “Here!” she cried. “I was kneeling here. I could see the tree and my mother’s tombstone.” She looked around frantically before her eyes met his again, “How can that be? I cannot think he would....”

“Shh.” He reached for her again and drew her into his arms, reassuring her, “You were kneeling on the hard ground, on the grass right?” She nodded. “The ground, except the area around your father’s grave, was not disturbed in any way was it?”

“No, but...”

“Then the list is here, somewhere above ground.” He felt her sigh of relief. “Was there anything else you can remember?”

Samantha did not get a chance to answer, their attention was diverted by the sound of hoof beats in the distance. Three riders garbed entirely in black gained the south ridge and were heading toward the manor. When one of the riders spotted them, he veered off and headed in their direction. Christian moved quickly, before Samantha had a chance to register what was happening, she was firmly sandwiched between the oak tree and Christian’s back.

He reached behind him and she felt the brush of his hand across her belly as he removed something from behind his back. When she realized it must have been a pistol he removed, she gasped. He growled, “Stay quiet. Hopefully they did not notice you. I would prefer to keep it that way.”

His stance was not rigid, but there was no denying he was ready to do battle, then suddenly, as the rider got closer, he relaxed. When the driver was nearly upon them, he stepped slightly away from Samantha allowing her just enough space to peek around him. When she realized it was Murphy who had ridden them down, she stepped out.

“What has you so hell bent this early my good man?” Christian teased.

Murphy’s face was grim as he dismounted, “Jordan’s returned and Robert is with him.”

Christian sobered instantly as Murphy tossed him the reins. Without question, Christian mounted and much to Samantha’s surprise Murphy picked her up and plopped her in Christian’s lap. He secured her tightly with one arm and they were off toward the manor. When she managed to gather her scattered wits she asked, “Who is Robert?”

“My brother.”

“I thought you did not have any siblings?”

“I guess I should say my stepbrother. He is Kathryn’s son, but even years before Kathryn married my father I thought of him as a brother.”

“Why would he be here?”

“I do not know, but from the look on Murphy’s face, the news cannot be good.”

“I have been meaning to ask, who exactly is Murphy? He surely is no stable hand.”

He smiled at her astuteness, “No, he is not, but I am afraid the explanation will take longer than the time we have allotted. We are here.” He pulled the mount to a halt, and in one fluid motion dismounted, then effortlessly plucked her from her perch and settled her on the ground, took her hand and they climbed the stairs together.

They found Robert, Jordan, Graydon, Séamas and Liam in the study. Seeing Christian and Samantha enter, Robert rose from the wingback chair he was sitting and met them, extending his hand to Christian. Christian clasped his brother's and pulled him into a hug, "It is good to see you."

"And you," Robert replied. "I only wish it was under better circumstances."

"I had gathered as much after taking a look at Murphy's ugly mug. First let me present to you Miss Samantha Prichard, Samantha, my brother Robert John Farrell, seventh Earl of Wingate." After Robert bowed over Samantha's hand and she curtsied in reply, Christian asked, "What has happened?"

"Why not have a seat?"

Christian shot his father a glance and received a barely discernible nod. He placed Samantha's hand on his sleeve and led her to the settee then settled himself next to her and turned his attention to Robert.

Robert had matured in the four months since he had seen him, only a little over a year separated the two, but, until recently, a lifetime of experience was between them. Robert joined the organization at seventeen, although unusually young, Christian had already been serving for three years when they had met. They did find it odd their paths never crossed at Eton, but with Christian accelerating through Oxford, it no longer seemed unusual.

At seventeen, Robert had been a willowy lad who now almost equaled Christian's height and was rapidly achieving an equaled physique. When the two of them and Sean entered the end of the Season ball at Almack's, half the debutantes nearly swooned. Yes, Robert had matured, an air of arrogant confidence now surrounded him. It was that confidence he drew on now to tell his brother and

stepfather the news.

“Unfortunately there are multiple levels to the distressing news I must share.” He looked at Graydon then the other members of the room, Murphy had just entered, and Bailey and Donovan had joined him as well. He took a breath, squared his shoulders and began, “There have been two more attempts on Monsieur de la Rues’ life, the last attempt was entirely too close for your brother’s comfort. They have both retired to my country estate in Derbyshire. Our thought was the connection would not be readily drawn, so they should remain safe. Captain, your brother wishes you and Bailey to join him post haste.”

When he received Graydon’s nod he continued. “William has left to fetch mother and bring her to the estate. Sir Aaron said you could focus better if you were not worrying about your wife. They should be arriving today.” Graydon paled slightly at the news, but said nothing.

“Donovan, you, Murphy and I are to stay with Christian until matters here have been resolved. When the list and the journal have been found, we are to join them in Derbyshire as well.”

“Has any harm befallen Uncle Aaron, Robert?” Christian interrupted.

“No.”

“Then that hardly constitutes grave news.”

“True, but I figured I would start with the most benign and lead up. Jordan will fill you in on what happened with Titus after I have told you the rest. On the twenty-first, our navy engaged the Spanish-Franco fleet in Cadiz. We were victorious, however, I regret to inform you, Lord Nelson perished during the battle.”

Gasps went around the room. Christian sobered first and ventured, “Sean, he was on the Ajax with Captain John Pilford.”

“There is no news yet on the status of the crew on the Ajax, reports have been sketchy at best, but they continue to trickle in. You must remember though, Sean, as far as anyone’s knowledge, was never really on the ship, so there will not be any record of him one way or the other. We will have to wait until she docks to know for sure. I am so sorry.”



Christian stood and went to the credenza and poured himself two fingers of brandy. The resonating clank of the crystal snifter hitting the top of the decanter gave evidence to Christian's unsteady hands. He downed the contents in one swallow, replaced the glass, then with hands spread on the mahogany top, he lowered his head. Samantha rose from the settee and crossed the room to him. She squeezed his arm, but did not say a word. It was enough to let him know she was there for him. He drew in a deep breath, raised his head, squared his shoulders, gave Samantha a weak smile and turned back to the room.

He cleared his throat and asked, "Jordan, what have you learned? It would be beneficial to my father to have as much information as possible before he departs. We really have no idea exactly how long it will be before we will be able to join him."

Jordan stared at him a moment before he was able to speak. "I followed him as Sir Bradford instructed. He arrived on Captain Morris' ship on Monday morning as he should have, and immediately retired to his cabin for the remainder of the voyage. He did not even venture out for meals, gave the captain the excuse of still not feeling well enough after the knock on his head.

"We arrived at Wormshead just past noon on Tuesday. He secured a horse from the local stable and headed straight for London. Just before nightfall, he took shelter at the Feathered Frog. I was sure he would secret himself away in his room as he had done on the ship, but he took his supper in the taproom. I also dined there for I was unconcerned he would suspect anything for he did not see me on the ship, and I was far enough behind him on the road, I was sure he did not see me then either.

"He was seated at a corner table in the back of the room. The innkeeper had just served him his dinner when two men entered the room followed by a dandy. The men sat at a table in the opposite corner from Titus, but the dandy walked straight to Titus' table and sat down. I thought the man was going to choke on the food he was chewing. He turned white as a sheet. They exchanged words, though I could not hear what they were saying, it looked as though Titus was pleading, and he kept nervously glancing at the men at the other table. I left the room when it looked like the dandy was finishing his conversation.

"I went onto the veranda and stood in the shadows. The dandy left the inn and climbed into an elegant black carriage pulled

by two perfectly matched high-steppers. Then, the two men who came in before the dandy, joined him in the carriage, then they drove away.

“I reentered the taproom just in time to see Titus toss back a drink, settle his tab and leave.”

Graydon asked, “Did any of these men look familiar to you?”

“No Sir, I am sorry but I did not recognize them, and the carriage was unmarked, no insignia.”

“You called the man a ‘dandy’, what did he look like?” This from Séamas.

“You know, one of those fancy city fellows. Bright coat and britches, floppy neckerchief, and shiny black shoes with big gold buckles, oh, and lest not forget a horribly powdered wig. Perhaps it was just the lighting in the room, but I would swear it was pink.”

“Old, young, tall, short, slim, portly?”

“I would say he was an older gentleman, late fifties perhaps, and very tall and skinny. He reminded me of a stork.”

Christian pushed away from the credenza and began to prowling the room, “Even with all the fops in London, that description should narrow the field of players down considerably. Was there anything else remarkable about the gentleman?”

“Other than his team, the finest pieces of horseflesh I have seen outside our own stables, no nothing.” Jordan confessed.

“Sorry we interrupted son, please continue,” Graydon prompted.

“I had no idea when Titus would be leaving, so I was up and ready before dawn, and I am glad I was, for he left right after first light. We wound our way around the backwater before we hit London Road, then it was a straight shot from there. I almost lost sight of him when we hit the city, but I found him again at a little park near Grosvenor’s Square. I watched him from outside the gates. He met a woman. At first when she saw him, she looked happy, almost excited to see him, but as they spoke she became distraught and started sobbing. When he failed to console her, he led her back to her companion, mounted his horse and road away.

“That is when I headed to the building you told me about Sir Bradford. I found your brother, gave him your missive and relayed all I observed. He summoned Lord Wingate, told me I was to remain with him at all times. The next day was the day of the attacks and the following day Sir Aaron and Monsieur de la Rues set out for Derbyshire. Lord Wingate and I had two days until we were to be at sea, but we left for the Feathered Frog and stayed there those two days in hopes I would spot either the dandy or his two men. Unfortunately, our efforts proved fruitless.” When Jordan had finished, he looked to Robert.

Robert filled in the few remaining blanks, “The woman in the park was Titus’ sister, very little is known about her, but we have people looking into it. After a few discreet inquiries at the inn and the surrounding town, no one had seen the gentleman in question before nor his two ruffians. Titus, on the other hand, has been known to frequent the Feathered Frog quite often over the past two years or so. I have brought Titus’ entire folder as well as letters for you Captain and you Christian from Sir Aaron, they are in my bags.”

Liam reached for the bell pull, when the butler answered he said, “Do fetch Lord Wingate’s bags, Timmons, and have them brought to him.”

“Very good Sir.” The servant replied and bowed out of the room.

When he returned and Robert had distributed the papers, Liam dismissed Jordan, complimenting him on a job well done and he instructed Timmons to show Robert to his room so he could freshen up. “Lunch will be served in an hour, I shall have someone fetch you to show you the way.”

Robert inclined his head in thanks and left with Timmons, Murphy, Donovan and Bailey followed in their wake. When the door clicked behind them, Graydon rose and went to his son, “They should be in port in a week, ten days at the most. You know they will get word to you as soon as there is anything definitive.”

“Patience was never one of my strong suits.” He commented ruefully.

Samantha faced him, “Why not go back to London? There are enough of your men here if anything were to happen.”

Christian brushed his knuckles against her cheek and smiled, "My duty is here with you and your family, besides I can be more productive here than sitting and waiting in London. As my father said, it will be at least a week before we know anything anyway."

Séamas cleared his throat, "Speaking of being productive, what were the two of you doing at the gravesite?"

Samantha turned to her brother, "As I told you the other night, I saw myself holding the list in my hands, and I was outside at the time. I had been thinking about father's cryptic message all night, when I woke this morning, I had a thought. What did father always call mother?"

"A Ghrá mo Chroí." Séamas and Liam replied in unison.

Samantha grinned, "And in father's note he said '*My heart will forever stand guard over the names*'..."

"You thought he buried it with her?" was Liam's incredulous cry.

She shot her brother an exasperated glare, "No you dolt, I went into Séamas room where mother's portrait is hanging to see if there was anything behind it. When I found nothing, we checked the armoire and the window where she was looking. Again, we found nothing. It was rather discouraging, I truly thought I was on to something. We were about to give up when I looked into mother's eyes, she was not looking at the window, but through the window. Directly through your window Séamas is a clear view of the old oak on the knoll."

"So you are back at the grave?"

This time she actually growled at Liam, "If you insist on being so obtuse, kindly keep your tongue in your head."

Graydon chuckled, "You two must have been a handful for your parents coming up." He smiled and shook his head at their chastised expressions. "So you and Christian went up to your parent's grave site. What did you find?"

"Well, nothing yet, but he did help me remember. I know it is there...somewhere."

Séamas looked perplexed at her comment, “How did he help you remember?”

“It is odd really. He had me close my eyes, and I just listened to his words. Soon I could see everything from my vision clearly. He asked me questions and things came into focus. And...” She paused and looked into his Christian’s smoky grey eyes.

“And what?” He prodded gently.

“And I was not afraid. For the first time seeing did not frighten me.” She whispered, stunned by her own admission.

“So where is it?” Liam asked impatiently, this entire morning had completely eroded his normally placid demeanor.

Not removing her eyes from Christian’s she rejoined, “We were not meant to find it yet.”

“Pardon?” Séamas queried.

“What I think Samantha’s was trying to say is in her vision the lighting was not very bright, she said it felt like either dawn or dusk. It was nearly midday when we were out there.” He looked away when she lowered her lashes. “Provided the weather holds, we will go out there again this evening and try again.”

“Sounds like a fine idea,” Graydon acquiesced. “In the meantime, all further discussion should remain between the five of us and Robert, and before you say anything son, yes I mean Murphy too. The fewer people who know, the easier it will be to protect the others, when the items have been found and you and Samantha are on your way to the Wingate estate, then Murphy and Donovan can be brought up to speed. Liam, will you and Séamas be making the journey as well?”

Startled, he looked at his brother whose only help was a shrug, “We have not given it much thought with all else that has been going on here today. Why does Samantha need to go?”

“She is so tightly woven into this, I am not quite sure which strings can be broken at which time. I believe she should see this through to the end, her assistance may prove safer for all of us.” He gave her a smile and she nodded her acceptance to his request.

Christian scowled at his father but kept his comments to himself. He would have been much more comfortable removing Samantha from the entire scenario sooner rather than later. However, his father's high-handedness forestalled any further discussion on the matter. Like it or not, Samantha was headed back to England with them, and if he approached the idea rationally, he could see his father's logic. Unnervingly he was finding rational thinking, where Samantha was concerned, beyond him.

In a clipping tone Christian retorted, "With the exception of you Father, no one is making a journey anytime soon if we do not find what we are looking for. Now, let us take a look at those files Robert brought."

Regrettably, the weather did not cooperate, the clouds had rolled in during lunch and the sleet and freezing rain started soon after. Immediately following lunch, Samantha and Christian gathered their belongings to return to Briarwood Manor, and Graydon and Bailey opted to leave early in an effort to beat the impending storm.

Christian was seated at Nathaniel's desk with Titus' file spread before him when Samantha entered the study. "It troubles me your father is traveling in this." She remarked as she stared pensively through the window. "Would it really have made that much of a difference if they waited until morning, the storm could have very well passed by then?"

"Or it could have gotten worse, making the roads impassable." He said as he rose from the desk and went to stand beside her. "Do not let it trouble you, he has traveled in much worse conditions." He stared at her profile for a moment before he added, "Now, would you like to tell me what is really troubling you?"

She let out a sigh but continued to look out the window, "'Tis frustrating, I can feel we are so close, but... well bemoaning the matter will not get it solved any faster." She turned toward him, "Did you find anything of interest in the file?"

"Nothing jumps out at me." He walked back to the folder and started thumbing through the pages. "Titus is the eldest of three, a sister who is three years younger and a brother six years younger. They both lived with him upon their parents' death. His sister married early last year and is now employed as a Governess for the Duke of Wilshire. Titus started at the agency a little over four years ago, shortly after his father's passing, who was relatively old at the time. His mother died seven, no eight years ago from an unrecorded illness.

"His work at the agency has been exemplary up until an incident six months ago. This is odd, it mentions he was reprimanded,

but there are no details as to what the offense was.” He frowned at the file as he scanned several pages looking for an explanation.

“Perhaps the offense was so minor it did not warrant an official entry into his file.”

“Perhaps.” He continued to scowl at the papers, willing them to reveal something he missed.

Samantha took the file from his hands and laid it on the desk. He gave her a quizzical look, and she smiled and took his hand, “Come, I have a treat for you.”

Instantly pulling in the reins on his imagination, he asked, “A treat?”

“Mmm, I have been busy this afternoon, and if we hurry there will be no one about to catch us.” She led him down the corridor toward the back of the house.

He raised a dark eyebrow at her comment but allowed himself to be pulled along. “You are being rather cryptic.”

“But I thought you enjoyed mysteries. Here we are.”

“The kitchen?”

“MmmHmm. When I need to get away from something I find overly taxing, I come in here, just like my mother did.” She nudged him onto a bench near a long oak plank table.

He chuckled at her, “And what exactly did you and your mother do in the kitchen?”

He raised his eyebrows when she placed a plate of glazed biscuits before him, then turned to pour some tea, “Why, I bake of course.”

“You bake? Not exactly the image I hold for a gente lady like yourself.” His wide teasing grin removed any sting from his words. “You really baked these?”

“Do not be sounding so surprised, you will find I am a woman of many talents.”



“Well from the smell of these, I would say, this is definitely one of them.” His plucked a biscuit from the plate and popped it in his mouth. “They even taste better than they smell, if that is at all possible. Sweet, spicy, they are delectable. What are they?”

“Pumpkin spice, I only make them this time of year, either them or apple pie. I have a complete arsenal of breads, muffins, scones, cakes and biscuits I can pull from when the mood strikes me.” She grinned as he scooped another from the plate and devoured it.

“If this is a fairly common occurrence, why were you worried if anyone saw us?”

“This is Mrs. Avery’s domain. She is quite used to me shooing her out of here to bake, but if she caught us eating in here, she would have apoplexy!”

She shushed him when he laughed. “Tell me about her.”

She blinked at him, not able to follow she asked, “Who, Mrs. Avery?”

“Your mother, she seemed like a remarkable woman.”

Samantha smiled wistfully, “She was. My parents met on an assignment, although Da rarely spoke of his work, much to my mother’s chagrin, he recounted this story numerous times. There had been some sort of uprising in the north and father was sent to ensure someone or not’s safety. He said it was a grunt assignment, but being as he was new, he had little choice. He arranged safe passage for the gentleman and saw him off without incident.

“Da decided to stop for a pint before setting back home and found himself in a bit of a sticky-wicket. He had inadvertently blundered into a pub, which erupted in chaos moments after he entered. Within seconds, he said, glasses, furniture and people were flying through the air. One moment he was in the midst of the skirmish, and the next thing he remembered was he was in the alley behind the pub with a slip of a street urchin spewing a stream of blasphemies at him.

“This dirty little creature in a tattered coat and thread-bared britches was calling him to task, saying he did not have enough sense to fill a thimble. Then he would tell us the lad turned furious emerald eyes on him, asked if he could manage not getting himself killed for

the remainder of the evening and stormed off. At this point, he would interject in the telling saying ‘I never did get that pint I was after’, and we would all snigger.

“Now as entertaining as the story was, the most important part has yet to be told. Da was at the agency some weeks later when a petite blonde-haired beauty with emerald green eyes walks up to him and says ‘I had wondered if it was safe to leave you in the alley, glad to see you made it back in alive’. When he finally scraped his jaw off the floor, he started a campaign to win her heart, and the rest, as they say, was history.”

Christian laughed and shook his head, “Well now I know where you get you gumption from. How long did your mother stay in the business?”

“Until just before Patrick was born. After that...” She stopped abruptly and stared at a space past Christian’s left shoulder.

He spun around but saw nothing there. “What is it?”

“The panel, I saw you holding the journal in your hands.” She whispered.

He stood immediately and walked to the wall and started tapping on it with his knuckle. One spot had a distinctly hollow sound. He felt around the edges of the decorative molding, then *click*, a tiny door opened. He spared Samantha a fleeting glance before he reached inside. His hand clasped around a small, leather bound book. He withdrew it and let out a measured streaming breath he had not been aware he was holding. Slowly he turned and brought the journal to her, placing it on the table.

At first, all she could do is stare in wonder, then cautiously she reached for it, sliding down the bench to make room for Christian to sit. He scooted in next to her and looked over her shoulder as she opened the book. Her eyes misted as she read the inscription on the front cover.

*My dearest Samantha,*

*If you are reading this, then your vision has come to pass. Even though you did not say anything to me, I could tell you had seen something which had you upset, and I surmised it was my fate which you saw.*

*Please try not to fret overly, the lives of the great many I was protecting far outweighed my own. Regrettably I cannot tell you outright the location of what you are seeking, nor how to encrypt the codes that lie in these pages, for if this journal were to fall into the wrong hands, the sacrifices of many will be all for naught. I have every confidence that if you do not try too hard and let your heart lead, you will not have any difficulty in unraveling this mystery.*

*Please do not feel the weight of this needs to lie solely on your shoulders. Enlist the aid of Sir Aaron and trust in whomever he deems competent enough to send to you. Your brothers will be there to help you to, but I implore you, at all cost, dissuade them from any notions they may have for vengeance. That is not what I believed in, or what I would condone.*

*Please always know how much I loved you.*

*Forever,*

*your Da*

Samantha turned her tear streaked face into Christian's chest and sobbed. He held her until her tears subsided then said, "We should leave before anyone comes in. Come, I will take you upstairs so you can freshen up." He slipped the journal into his coat pocket and stood. Silently she let him lead her. They paused before her bed chamber door, "What if I cannot figure it all out? What if..."

He gathered her back into his arms, "Shh, your father was an extremely intelligent man. He had every confidence in you, and so should you." He nudged her chin up so their eyes met. "Besides, you now have me to help you." He planted a chaste kiss on the bridge of her nose, "Now, go rest for a bit and I will see you at supper."

Samantha attempted a smile but settled for a nod and went into her room.

Christian stared at the closed door for a few moments before he headed for the study. He debated pouring himself a brandy, but opted to keep a clear head. He sat by the fire and withdrew the journal from his breast pocket, reread the letter from Nathaniel but went no further. He would wait until after dinner when Samantha joined him, he thought it only right.

After supper, Christian and Samantha retired to the study, opting to inform Liam and Séamas on the morrow of the journal, so as not to draw any attention to their find. Samantha shut the door as she entered the room, then without preamble asked, “So, were you able to decipher anything useful from the journal?”

Christian laid the journal on the desk then settled himself in the chair in front, stretching his long legs before him, “All I have read was your father’s note.” Samantha raised questioning brows at him as she sat herself behind the desk, his subtle relinquishment of power not lost on her. “Without your input, I doubt I would be able to even begin to unravel what lies within those pages. In actuality, you may even have tribulations until we have the list in hand.”

“Well, we will never know unless we have a look.” Samantha pursed her lips and frowned at him then looked around the room, “Did you want to bring a chair here or do you think the settee would work better? No sense in either of us straining to read.”

“Whichever.”

She rose from her chair and made her way to the settee, lit the lantern on the side table and waited for Christian to join her, “Ready?”

“By all means.”

They spent the next half hour reading through the pages before Samantha threw up her hands in disgust and rose from the couch to pace, “How are we supposed to make hide nor hare of this gibberish? ‘Cobbler 86– 3V o/t H o FR, Modiste 13– h RP, MTC’ Ooo!” In frustration, she raked her hands through her hair, displaced the knot and sent pins flying. A cascade of honeyed curls swirled around her waist and her skirt swished as she continued to pace. She glared at Christian when she heard his low throaty chuckle, “How can you be so glib or does everything on those pages make perfect sense to you and I

am just ignorant?"

He stood and faced her, she bristled when he reached for her, but he ignored it and looked directly into her eyes, "Not a bloody word makes sense, and I did warn you that would probably be the case. You are trying to get the whole picture of a puzzle with only half its pieces. My chuckle was over the amazement you lasted as long as you did. Quite frankly, my eyes crossed after the first two pages." She looked at him skeptically, then noting the self-recriminating twinkle in his eye, relaxed and smirked. He gave her arms a little reassuring squeeze, "Give it time, all the pieces will fall into place, you will see."

She looked at him beseechingly, "How can you be so sure?"

"I just am." He proclaimed and straightened to all his arrogant height. "Enough for tonight, tomorrow we shall meet with your brothers and see what, if anything, they can make of this. Now, I know it is late and it is chilly outside, but the rain has stopped, so I was wondering if you would care for a walk. It may help clear your head."

A vivid memory of their last evening walk flashed through her mind, and if this one were to venture down the same path her mind would end up muddled rather than clear, but she agreed anyway. She fetched her ermine lined cape and met him at the door. Before placing her hand in the crook of his arm, he raised her hood and fastened the tie about her neck. Warmth rushed through her at his familiar gesture.

The moon peeked from behind the thinning clouds, faintly illuminating the path which lead to the gardens. In the spring the gardens would be bursting with a riot of colors and scents, but now it lay austere except for the arborvitae and holly. "Your wrist has been unbound all day. How does it feel?"

"A trifle stiff, but it's not painful." She paused for a moment.

"What is it?" He asked. When she still hesitated, he prodded, "I will answer if I can, you need not be afraid to ask me anything."

She took a breath, "Very well. I know very little about you, other than snippets I have been able to piece together. I was wondering if you would tell me about your friend Sean, if it would not upset you." She added with a rush.

Of all the things she could have asked him, that was the last thing he had expected, but he did not have any aversion to the question so he asked, "What would you like to know?"

"Nothing in particular. Tell me about him, your friendship, how you met. Whatever you like."

"And by hearing me talk about my friend, you will know more about me?"

"Of course. You can glean great insight into a person by the company he keeps."

"Normally I would agree, but for those in my profession, the company we keep rarely has anything to do with choice but necessity."

"True, but necessity does not warrant you calling him friend."

"For someone who has lived a mostly sheltered existence, you are remarkably astute. Very well, analyze away. Sean and I met shortly after he was recruited. He was young and brash and had an enormous chip on his shoulder. In short, he was angry with the world. His parents were dead, his brother had been murdered and he was alone. The only reason he agreed to be part of the agency was he thought it a means to seek vengeance for his brother's death.

"Although I was two years younger than Sean, I was more experienced in agency matters since, in all truth, was raised within its ranks. We were paired together along with my now cousin-by-law, Derrick. Those first few months were hellish, but eventually Derrick and I were able to unravel Sean's ulterior motives and convince him of our support, provided he would focus on the mission at hand and stop trying to get us killed. It took a while for Sean to trust us, but the journey formed an unbreakable bond between the three of us."

"Did you ever find Sean's brother's murderer?"

Christian shook his head, "Michael's, that was Sean's brother, best friend John found him. John is currently the Captain of the Ajax."

"The ship Sean is on?" She asked gently.

"The very same." Forcefully abandoning his grave tone, he

added lightly, "So, my good lady, what conclusions have you drawn on my character?"

She stopped walking and turned toward him, her heart melted. "You are clever or you would not have been given the responsibility of a new recruit. You are compassionate or you would have forsaken Sean when he was being so unapproachable. You are loyal or you would have given up on him when he nearly had you killed." She laid her hand on his cheek, "And lastly, you are caring or you would have not been so shaken when you heard of the circumstances in which your friend is now."

He covered her hand with his, then turned his face and placed a kiss on her palm, "And how is it you can see all this when you claim not to know me?"

"I would need to be blind not to see." She whispered. First hand, she had witnessed all the traits she had described plus many more. He was a man to be admired, to be trusted and unfortunately for her, to be loved. Her mind knew his time with her was limited, but now she admitted to herself that when he left, he would be taking her heart with him. The realization raked a shiver through her body.

"Let us head back, the wind is picking up and you could catch a chill." He removed her hand from his cheek and laced his fingers through hers, kissing her knuckles before he turned them toward the house.



They entered the door just as the hall clock was chiming midnight. He removed his coat then helped her with hers, leaving them on the banister for the Avery's to tend to in the morning. Together they mounted the two flights of stairs to the bedchambers. He stopped in front of her door and turned her toward him, but before he could place a kiss on her forehead as he intended, she laced her arms around his neck, stood on tiptoes and pulled him into a kiss.

Caught off guard he responded unreservedly, allowing some of his pent-up demons to unleash. His arms encircled her and drew her in close so their bodies melded from chest to thighs. He let his fingers trail through into her silken hair as his mouth slanted over hers and their tongues dueled. He relished her response as she melted against him, and her soft throaty moan was nearly his undoing. When he started to pull away, she tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him back, deepening the kiss.

He knew he needed to stop, this was a lady in his arms, not some doxie. With Herculean determination, he pulled himself back. His breathing ragged, he placed a kiss on her mouth, her cheek, her forehead then froze when she whispered, "Show me."

"I would love nothing more..."

"Then show me." She placed feather light kissed along his jaw.

Christian swallowed as his mind whirled. "You do not know what you are asking," he rasped.

She pulled back so she could see him, his eyes looked almost black in the candlelight, "Yes, I do." She reached behind her and unlatched the door, reached for his hand, and drew him inside. He resisted at first, then groaned and let her lead him into the room. He closed the door and locked it, tossed his coat and waistcoat onto the nearest chair and reached for her. She went into his arms without

reservation. When before she was met with fervor, now she was met with a tenderness that sent her senses reeling.

He rained kisses over her face and neck, finally he captured her lips in a slow sensuous branding. Her whimper turned to a sigh when he left her lips only to explore the sensitive area beneath her earlobe. She shivered when he made his leisurely descent to the hollow where her neck and shoulder met, her head lolled back granting him easier access to the responsive flesh he sought. His large hands spanned her rib cage, his thumbs lightly brushed the undersides of her breasts then grazed the sensitive nipples, causing them to pucker. A tingling sensation coursed through Samantha and her breathing became shallow. She clung to his strong shoulders, for her legs had become shaky.

Somewhere in the far recesses of her mind she registered he had unfastened the buttons of her gown, slipped the sleeves off her shoulders down to her elbows, and had effectively trapped her arms at her sides. His lips explored the swell of her breast exposed above the scooped neck of her chemise.

When she started to struggle, he slowed. A wave of relief flooded him when he realized she merely wanted to free her arms, for now her fingers were tangled in his hair, not pulling him away but urging him on. He knew he needed to stop soon, but not just yet, not before he had a chance to sample some of her unique delicacies.

A gasp escaped her when his mouth closed over one aching peak, the texture of the cotton fabric added to the friction of his tongue. When her breath hitched, he moved to her other breast, licked, then nipped, then laved before he drew furled peak into his mouth. He bit the ribbon holding her chemise closed, tugged and the material fell away, exposing her. His warm breath on her bare flesh sent shivers through her. Christian's mouth closed over her breast again, this time without the barrier of her chemise, and she cried out when he began to suckle. Heat flooded her, pooling at the heart of her womanhood.

An overwhelming need to feel him, to touch him came over her. She found the pin securing his cravat and removed it, then unwound the neckerchief and tossed both on the floor. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, several popped off in her impatience, she pulled his shirt free from his britches and urged it over his head.

At last, her hands met with warm skin pulled taut over rock hard muscles, muscles that quivered at her touch. She allowed herself a leisurely exploration, up his arms to his shoulders, then across his back. Samantha lightly raked her nails across his skin and felt him shudder, 'twas a heady feeling to know, even in her inexperience, she had the power to affect him.

With a groan, he pulled back. This interlude had already progressed further than he had intended. Panting he tried to clamp down on his baser instincts, for the urge to be buried in her soft welcoming flesh was stronger than he had ever experienced. Chest heaving, he set her from him.

Momentarily stunned by his withdrawal, all she could do was stare at him. Her eyes left his and appreciatively scanned his naked torso, from his broad shoulders, to his defined chest lightly covered with dark hair, to his flat stomach and tapered waist. She knew he was reining in his passion, and knowing their time together was limited, she would not be denied. She took a step back from him. Their gazes locked. She hooked her thumbs into the chemise and gown, which had pooled around her waist, and nudged them over her hips, letting them fall in a swish of fabric at her ankles. She watched his eyes dilate and the skin pull taut over his high cheekbones as he clenched his jaw.

She was an ethereal vision standing before him, a cascade of honeyed curls danced about her waist, creamy white flesh gently flushed with passion, high round breasts with dusky pink areolas proudly peaked just waiting for him to take. Her molten gold eyes locked on his as she stepped out of her skirt and covered the short distance between them.

He swallowed convulsively when her palms brushed his stomach, then her hands made their painfully slow ascent up his torso. Her fingers thread through the hair on his chest, then slowly circled back so her palms brushed over his flat male nipples. She was fascinated when they reacted the same way hers had. He laid his hands over hers, ceasing their torturous caress. His voice sounded like he had swallowed broken glass, "We must stop."

"Why, do you not want me?"

"With every fiber of my being, but we cannot do this." He rasped.

He released her hands when she moved them, she slid them up to cup his cheeks and said, "You know as well as I, we do not know what tomorrow will bring, our time together can only be measured in the now. It is you who I want to show me, to love me." She drew his face down to hers and he was lost, his mouth slanted over hers as he sank into her soul-searing kiss. The feel of her naked flesh against his burned.

He scooped her into his arms, carried her to the bed, and laid her down on the feathered coverlet. He left her only long enough to rid himself of his boots and britches, then stretched out next to her, instantly reclaiming her mouth. While his lips and tongue plundered, his hands roamed her curves, down her slender arm, over her ribs and swell of her hip, to her shapely thigh, then unhurriedly back up to cup her breast. She arched into his touch, her breast swelling to fill his palm. She could feel the steely strength of his arousal pressed against her thigh and she instinctively moved against it.

When his mouth replaced his hand, she nearly wept at the sheer pleasure he was evoking. As he moved to her other breast, his hand started its leisurely descent over her stomach, but before he reached the curls covering her apex, he detoured to her leg, then slowly dragged his fingers from her knee back to her stomach via her inner thigh. He continued his torment when his wandering fingers made the same journey on her other leg. When she was withering beneath him, he ended her suffering by sliding his fingers into her sleek silken folds.

He captured her cry in a kiss as his finger entered her, stretched her, he could feel her muscles tighten around him as he slowly moved his finger out and in again. He repeated this motion several times until her hips started to rock to meet his thrusting hand, then he felt her climax, rippling spasms caressed his fingers as her moisture drenched them. Gradually he removed his hand as the last of her convulsions subsided.

He moved over her, spreading her thighs with his knee. She felt the blunt tip of his erection press at her opening. He whispered in her ear, "There is no way to do this without hurting you, but the pain should only last a minute if you lie still." He rose up on his forearms, then little by little, entered in until he touched her maidenhead. Perspiration beaded on his upper lip and brow. In a strangled voice he said, "We can still stop, but you need to tell me now."

She answered him by thrusting her hips toward his,

breeching the barrier herself. She closed her eyes to the pain, but did not cry out. Christian pressed her hips down into the mattress, careful to minimize any movement within her. When he felt the tension leave her body he began to move, tentatively at first, gradually easing in deeper with each movement until he was finally buried to the hilt. Again, he paused until her body adjusted to sheathing him fully.

“Are you alright?” She nodded. “It does not hurt anymore does it?” She shook her head. He let out a shaky breath, “Raise your knees a little higher, but keep your toes on the bed.” She complied. “That is right,” he crooned as he began to move within her. It took every ounce of his strength to keep the rhythm slow and steady, he was rewarded for his efforts when she started matching his motion, meeting him thrust for thrust. He watched as her eyes glazed then close, she arched under him as she teetered on the edge of the precipice. With a final thrust, she fell over the edge, her contraction taking him with her.

Unable to sustain his weight on his now liquefied limbs, he collapsed on her. In his vast education, well beyond his years, he had never experienced such an earth-shattering climax. Many seasoned women had warmed his bed, and although the interludes were gratifying, not one of them had brought him to this bone melting sated state. A virgin, an innocent, accomplished this, the concept boggled his mind. He tried to remove his weight from her, for he knew in the foggy corners of his mind he must have been crushing her, but his limbs would not cooperate.

Christian tried to concentrate on controlling his breathing and bringing his racing heart back to a normal tempo, but all he could do was focus on the feeling of those graceful fingers slowly tracing a path along his spine, from between his shoulder blades to his derrière. He heard her chuckle when he tightened his butt cheeks, so he summoned up enough energy to rise onto his forearms and look down at her.

She smiled at him sleepily and his heart swelled. Reluctantly he rolled off her, taking her and the covers with him, and settled her at his side. Samantha snuggled into him, arm draped over his chest, hand over his heart, legs tangled with his, and drifted off to sleep. He had lain there for quite some time, stroking her back, listening to her slow steady breathing, before sleep finally claimed him.

Christian left Samantha sleeping snugly in her bed before dawn, and made his way to his own bedchambers. The bed seemed

cold and empty without her by his side, but her scent still surrounded him and with his body still replete, he drifted off into a sound sleep.

At breakfast, Samantha informed Mrs. Avery they would not be home for dinner. They would be dining with hers and Christian's brother at Killarn. Shortly after the meal, they set off for her brothers' house. Christian drove the reticule being drawn by one of her father's speckled geldings. All his focus appeared to be between the horse's ears.

The day was overcast and dank, however, it did nothing to dampen Samantha's mood. She felt glorious. Early in the morning, while she lay in bed, she resigned herself to enjoy the time she and Christian had together, fleeting as it may be. She knew he held her heart, and once he was gone, there would never be another. Her only wish now was that a little piece of her would remain within his heart as well. She hoped he would someday look back on their encounter and remember it fondly.

Christian on the other hand was quiet and reserved all morning. The events of the previous night left his thoughts and emotions in a jumbled mess, the feelings of uncertainty were alien to him, and he did not care for them overly much. Samantha's actions as well reactions did not fall in line with any gently bred lady he had ever met. Her response to him led him to believe she was starting to have feelings for him, and yet her words made him feel like a means to an end, a convenient diversion.

Then again, who did he think he was, he could not sort out his own feelings, why should he think she should declare her undying love for him? All in all, he was rather disgusted with himself. She deserved a husband and a family, a notion, quite frankly, he had never entertained. Now he had effectively eliminated her chance at a marriage worthy of her station. He should have shown more restraint, he should have...

She broke into his self-recrimination, "Christian, I have no regrets over what happened last night. I am not some young debutante

on the marriage block. At my age, I am quite firmly, and contently I might add, on the shelf. Besides, with my particular brand of talent, I am not exactly prime marriage material. If it were not for you, I would never have known what it was to be a real woman, and that is something I could never regret.”

“Samantha, you deserve a husband, a family, I am not sure I can offer it to you.” He gritted.

“Did I ever ask it of you? No, I did not, nor would I. Extenuating circumstances have thrown us together, my only expectation is we make the best of the time we have.”

They drew up to the barn and Christian tossed the reins to the waiting stable hand. He alighted then turned, plucked Samantha from her perch, then slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and tersely said, “Let us walk,” and set off at a brisk pace on the path that led toward the pond.

Samantha tried not to smile as she stole a glance at him. His eyes were staring straight ahead, but she doubted he was seeing anything, his profile looked to be chiseled from granite, that was except for the muscle in his jaw, which at the moment, was flexing as much as if he were chewing a mouthful of suet.

When they reached the edge of the pond, he stopped and turned her toward him, “My job has me traveling for weeks, sometimes months at a time.”

“Much like my father,” she dismissed.

“Truthfully, I had not thought of myself taking a wife for another ten or fifteen years.”

“And why should you?”

“Precisely,” he nodded, then growled in frustration and turned away. “Not precisely.” He ranted. “What happened last night has changed everything.”

“Again I shall ask, why should it?”

Christian threw up his hands in disgust and whirled on her, “Are you truly that naive or do you take some perverse pleasure in being obtuse?”



“Do not dare use that arrogant tone with me. I am not naïve nor am I being obtuse.” She raised herself to her full unimpressive height and glared at him. “I approached last night with my eyes fully open. I knew what I was about and I thought I explained my position adequately enough for even your dense brain to comprehend, and furthermore, whatever gave you the impression I would accept you for my husband?” Samantha railed and stormed off toward the house.

It took all of his effort not to reach for her, to whirl her around and make her listen, but listen to what? He did not know. How could he possibly convey what he could not put into words himself? He had not lied to her. He had not pictured himself married for another decade at least, but was that what he was implying? Was the basis in that thought set from decorum or from a deeper unidentified need? Never in his days had he had to look so deeply into himself in search of an answer, an honest answer, one he was unable or unwilling to put a name to. He raked his hands through his hair and let out a growl of frustration. He was truly adrift in uncharted waters and the feeling did not sit well.

He looked toward the manor and could just make out a small figure entering the main door. He sighed and debated whether to go after her now or let her cool down for a bit. Deciding to let her Irish temper cool, he turned and started to stroll around the pond. He had walked several yards when he heard a snap and the ground beneath his right foot started to give way. With all his might, he pushed off with his grounded foot and rolled hard left, clearing the now exposed cavern he had unearthed. He rose to his knees and brushed himself off, allowing his pulse to return to its normal cadence. The hole was roughly a meter square and two meters deep, the sides smooth, small enough to be easily concealed, yet large enough to cause some unsuspecting soul some serious harm.

Christian cursed himself for not being more alert. He scanned the walk around the pond as a brisk wind ruffled his hair and tossed leaves into the air. There appeared to be another area, a third of the way around, which looked suspicious, so he opted to investigate. He grabbed a fallen branch from beneath a nearby tree to use to test the ground as he made his way around. When he reached the area he had spotted, it turned out to be nothing more than a blown pile of dried leaves and grass, however, he still was not at ease, so he continued his patrol of the circumference.

His efforts were not for naught. Almost directly across from the first hole there was another, equal in size and depth, and

concealed with twigs, dried grass and leaves. The area around was also strewn with much of the same debris, so unless someone was specifically looking, it would be easy to miss, and thereby becoming victim.

Christian crouched down at the lip of the second hole and studied it, then he let his eye search the area. No footprints or hoof prints, no mound of discarded dirt and rock, no sign of anything amiss. Whoever had dug the holes was very thorough. He straightened and headed to the manor. He needed to tell Robert and speak with either Séamas or Liam, preferably Liam, for he was the more levelheaded of the two, regarding the holes and what they implied.

He found Liam alone in his study, going over the estate books. "The task never ends does it?" Christian commented getting Liam's attention. "A word with you if I may?"

"By all means, sit." Liam pointed to the chair in front of his desk as he closed the ledgers he had been working on, "You are looking a bit bedraggled if I might say, highly out of character."

"I can imagine. I took a bit of a tumble out by the pond. In fact, that was what I came to talk to you about."

"You are not hurt are you?" Liam rose from his chair and leaned across his desk to get a better look at Christian.

"Nothing but a few scratches, pay it no mind." Christian admonished, "My concern is over what caused my little mishap, not the mishap itself."

"Sorry, I am not following." He sat back in his chair with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Who mostly uses the walk around the pond?"

"On rare occasion my brother and I, but mostly Samantha. She would often stroll the walk after visiting our mother's grave or she would sit on one of the stone benches and read."

"Would she normally go alone or did your father escort her?"

"She was always alone, said she needed the quiet time with her thoughts." Liam began to frown.

"And this was common knowledge?" Christian pressed.

"I would guess, what is it exactly you are getting at here?" Liam started to rise from his seat again as he asked.

"Well either you have yourself some overachieving moles, or

someone was out to harm Samantha. What caused my tumble was a large concealed hole, and its twin on the opposite side of the pond could have proven equally as treacherous if I had not uncovered it.”

Liam paled as he sunk back into his chair. “This could only mean the person who is doing this is someone close enough to know our family’s routine and familiar enough not to draw any suspicion. But who, who?”

“Who what brother?” Séamas asked as he entered the room and noticed the intensity of the conversation. Without preamble, Christian informed him of the mishap and what they had discussed thus far. “Before you go any further, let me fetch Samantha. She is currently in the parlor wearing a rut into the floor grumbling under her breath about some pompous heathen.” Séamas looked pointedly at Christian then added, “I shall bring her up to speed on our walk here, then we can continue.”

When the door closed behind him Liam chuckled, “And what have you done to raise my sister’s legendary ire?”

“Let us just say I made some assumptions without having all the facts, and she is none too pleased with me at the moment.” Christian answered wearily.

Liam laughed, “You, my good man, are in for a bumpy few days I guarantee. Lucky for you, I have never seen my sister hold a grudge for longer than that, but you can never tell.”

“I shall take your warning to heart, thank you.” He smiled at Liam ruefully. Then a frown crossed his features, “Have you seen my brother? I was hoping to get his opinion on this recent development.”

Liam startled and began sifting through the papers on his desk, “I had forgotten, he left a note. Ah, here it is,” and handed the folded sheet of parchment to Christian.

Christian opened the paper with Robert’s bold black scroll.

***Playing a hunch, will report as soon as able.***

Christian folded the note and placed it in his pocket just as the study door opened. They rose as Samantha entered the room and exchange knowing glances when they saw the fire blazing in her eyes. She witnessed the exchange but refrained from commenting, “I trust you were not injured?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. Please have a seat.” When she settled, he continued, “During any of your walks, did you ever notice anyone paying you more attention than was justified.”

“I rarely noticed anyone a’tall. On occasion when someone did cross my path, there was nothing more than a polite exchange of greetings. The staff at both estates is well accustomed to my desire for solace while I walk.”

Not wanting to lead her, but needing a more direct answer, he asked, “On any of those occasions did you happen upon Titus?”

Samantha furrowed her brow and gave the question some lengthy thought, “Now that you mention it, some months ago I did run into him. It was in the evening. The weather was still pleasant and he said he wanted to enjoy a bit of the country air before he headed back to London.”

“Did he walk with you?” Liam asked.

“Yes he did, then he escorted me back to Briarwood Manor, bade me goodnight. Then I did not see him again until he returned here with your father.”

Séamas asked, “The pond is a bit far for a stroll to take in some country air do you not think? That could be accomplished amply without leaving the confines of Briarwood. What did you discuss during your walk?”

“Hmm, I guess now that you mention it, it does seem odd. It did not at the time. As for what we conversed about, I have not a clue. Mostly inconsequential chatter, none of which comes readily to mind.”

Christian digested what she said before he queried, “Is there any chance Titus knows about your gift?”

Liam answered for his sister, “Although Samantha’s talents are not publicized, she has helped enough people in the area that it is fairly common knowledge. It is entirely possible that he does know.”

“I would hardly say it was common knowledge, there are only a few people who actually experienced firsthand what I can do.”

“Ah yes, but people talk, and with the nature of the subject, I would wager the talk flowed freely, especially since the help you have given has been well documented and is known not to be a farce.” Christian interjected. “Let us table this discussion until we have had

more time to mull over the facts. Now, I believe Samantha would like to enlighten you on the nature of our visit today.”

All eyes turned to Samantha as she withdrew the journal from her reticule. Twin gasps came from her brothers, “Is that what I think it is?” Séamas questioned.

Samantha nodded, “Da’s journal.”

“Well, let us have a look,” Liam exclaimed as he cleared his desk.

“Do not get yourselves too excited as of yet.” Christian warned, “You may be disappointed.”

It took only a matter of moments before they realized Christian’s prediction was accurate. “How in bloody hell are we supposed to decipher this gibberish?” Séamas griped.

Christian gave him a smirk, “I believe those were your sister’s exact words as well.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, “Needless to say,” she turned and looked at her brothers, “without the list, the possibility of interpreting what is written in the journal is quite slim. We need both pieces of the puzzle if we have any chance at all, and even then, success is not guaranteed.”

“Samantha, how much before an event do your visions come?” Christian asked.

“Usually a few days before, possibly a week or two, but sometime only moments before.”

“Never months or years before?” Christian pressed.

“They never have before, why?”

“Because then I can only conclude you will be finding the list shortly. The first flash you had of holding the list in your hands was ten days ago.” He continued as she rolled around his logic, “I need you to think. Close your eyes and lean your head back and relax. Was there anyone with you when you found the list?” He crooned.

Samantha did as Christian instructed as her brothers exchanged baffled glances. “I cannot see anyone, but I can feel someone watching me.”

“Do you feel threatened?”

She shook her head, “No, I feel safe, as if someone is standing guard over me.”

“The light still dim?” he continued his questioning in a gentle monotone.

“Yes, and there is a cold breeze. I can see the writing on the pages, but it is difficult to make out the words.”

“What else can you tell me?” he coaxed.

“I can feel the wind picking up and a spatter of icy rain on my cheeks, then I am running.”

“Is there someone chasing you?”

“No, I need to make it back to the house before the list is ruined.” She replied breathlessly, as if she was actually running, “I stumble but there is a hand at my elbow to keep me from falling.” Samantha straightened, opened her eyes and looked at Christian. “You were there to stop me from falling. It was you who was guarding me at my mother’s grave.”

They stared at each other for a moment before he spoke, “Well then, it looks like the stage has been set and hopefully my suggestion will not put any undue pressure on you, keeping you from fulfilling your vision. Today is cold and overcast, and threatening rain at any moment, hopefully enough of a deterrent to anyone wishing you malice. The light should start to diminish not long after lunch. I propose at that time, the two of us head out. In your visions thus far, you already have the list in your hands. Perhaps with a little prodding I can bring you to the moments right before you find the list.”

Samantha looked at him skeptically but resigned herself on a sigh, “It would hurt nothing to give it a try, but I cannot make you any promises. This has never been something I can call up at will, it just intrudes whenever and wherever it sees fit.”

“Fair enough, and if this does not happen to be the right time, we will just keep trying until it is the right time.” Christian placated.

By the time they completed lunch, all four were wound tighter than a top. The wind had picked up and the clouds had thickened, and the light would most definitely qualify as being dim. Christian helped Samantha with her ermine-lined cloak and muff. She raised her hood and turned to look at her brothers who had gathered in the vestibule to see them off. Liam broke some of the tension when he embraced his sister and whispered in her ear, “Try not to worry yourself. If it was meant to be today, then you will find it, if not, the day will soon come. Either way I love you.”

She gave him a squeeze and whispered, “I love you too.”

Séamas stepped into line, gave her a brisk hug and said gruffly, “Give’em what-for elf.”

She smiled at him, “I shall try my best.”

“Aye, your best is often far better than any other.” He praised.

Christian fasten the final button on his greatcoat then prodded, “Ready?”

When Samantha nodded, he slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and they headed out the door. Samantha walk stiffly beside him, silent in her own little world. Her pallor prompted Christian to try to distract her, “Elf?”

“Hmm?” she blinked at him.

“Séamas called you Elf?”

She giggled, “Yes, and he is the giant. By the time Séamas was four he was already bigger than I was. One night when our mother was reading us a fable before bed, the nicknames came to be. She was telling the tale of a giant and an elf who had befriended one another. The giant was big and strong, but the elf was older and wiser and the story told how each was able to save the other when the need arose. When the telling was done, Séamas proclaimed I was the elf



from the story.” She chuckled, “I can still remember the chortle he let out when I replied that must make him the giant. He was very pleased with the idea to say the least.”

“And have you had the chance to save your giant from any scrape?”

“Aye, and by using my cunning and wit. But in all fairness there were a few times when Séamas’ brawn has proven quite useful as well.”

“Oh?” he raised an eyebrow.

“One time comes to mind in particular. My cat Mishka decided to give birth in the hay we had stacked in the barn for the winter. The nights had already turned cold so I needed to get her and her litter into the house or none of them would have made it. It took the good part of one afternoon to locate the brood, then when I did, as luck would have it, it was in a spot well out of my reach. I dragged a barrel over to the hay, slung a basket over my shoulder, and stood on tiptoes to get Mishka and her babies out of the burrow she had created. Grabbing her and the first few kittens was easy, but the burrow was deep and dark and I could not be sure I had all of them. It was a struggle trying to get to the back of the burrow without dumping the cats already in the basket.

“I was about to give up when I heard a faint mewing coming from the hole. I just could not leave the kitten in there, so I managed to widen the opening to the hole and pull myself into it. Picture this if you would, there I am buried in a wall of hay past my shoulders, feet no longer touching the barrel because I stretched too far. I cannot go forward because I could not get any footing to hoist myself up any further and I cannot go back because my feet were dangling, and I was afraid to fall and injure the kittens in the basket. I was a sight, I am sure. My calls for help were muffled on account of my head was stuck in a hay pile, but luckily before too long my brothers showed up.

“When they finally finished laughing at me, they decided to help. Liam wiggled the basket off my shoulder and he and Patrick took the cats to the house. Séamas put my feet on his shoulders so I could reach the remaining kitten, then helped me down. As soon as my feet hit the ground, the stack shifted and the borrow collapsed upon itself. Yes, my giant saved not only a helpless kitten, but more than likely my sorry hide as well.”

Although the story worked well to divert Samantha’s

thoughts, it unsettled Christian's. The thought of her risking her life so, tied knots in his gut. He had to swallow before he was sure his voice would not give him away, "How old were you then?"

"I had just turned sixteen. Do not fret, I would not be so foolish as to try a stunt like that again, now I would simply have the staff disassemble the hay to get to the kittens." She gave him a devilish grin then paused and exclaimed, "Oh! We are here." She smiled at him, "You are a sly one, are you not?"

He gave her an exaggerated bow and pressed his fist to his heart, "Guilty as charged Madame. You were looking overwrought and that simply would not do if we were to get anything accomplished."

Smiling she complimented, "Well played. Alright, now what?"

"Now, we proceed as we did before. It proved positive results last time, so why change our tactics?"

"As sound a plan as any. So what do you want me to do?"

Christian took her hand, "Before we get started I want you to look around and place yourself in the same position as in your vision."

She bit her lower lip as she surveyed the area around her parents' graves, then gently tugged on his hand and said, "I was in front of the gravestone," she dropped his hand and knelt on the ground, "like this."

"Excellent. You said you could not see anyone, which would mean I was standing behind you. My guess would be like so?" She turned to see where he was then nodded and he continued. "Good. Now remember, I am only a few steps behind you so there is nothing to worry about. I would like for you to close your eyes and relax – wonderful, now take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Do you feel calm?"

Samantha nodded.

"Alright, you have just walked up to your mother's grave and knelt down. What do you see?"

"I reach for the stone and smooth my fingers over the words." She enacted the motion while she spoke, "I can feel the tears on my cheeks as I read the words *'Mary Colleen Prichard, May 8, 1749 – January 30, 1799, beloved wife and mother, may she ever rest in*

*peace’.*” Samantha stopped speaking and there were tears streaking her face.

“You are doing so well, do not stop,” he coached. “What did you do next?”

She took in a fractured breath before speaking, “I brushed the dead leaves and grass from the base, as I am, my finger snags on something in the base stone.” Her eyes flew open when her fingers did in fact brush against an uneven lip in the stone. She let out a small gasp.

“What is it? What did you find?” He asked in a hushed voice, employing all his restraint not to go and kneel next to her and see for himself.

When the piece of stone she had her fingers on moved, she whispered, “Part of the base stone has a false front.” Gently she slid the piece up revealing a small opening. She reached inside, her fingers brushed something and she snatched her hand away.

“Was there something in there or not?” Patience was never one of Christian’s strongest traits.

All she could do is nod, her hand shook as she reached back into the hole. This time she did not come out empty handed. Clutched between her fingers was a roll of parchment, tied with a ribbon. Gingerly she slid the ribbon off and unfurled the paper. Between the dim light and the tears clogging her vision, it was impossible to read a single word on the page, but she did not need to see to know what she held. Carefully she rolled the papers up and retied the ribbon, placing the precious cargo in the lining of her cape. As she stood and turned toward Christian, it started to rain. They smiled at each other, he took her elbow and they ran for shelter.

They burst through the front entrance in a gale. The heavens had opened up when they were fifty meters from the house, their sprint had them winded but laughing. Samantha did slip and Christian was there to stop her from falling, just as she had envisioned. Liam and Séamas heard the commotion in the vestibule and came to investigate.

Samantha extracted the rolled parchment from the folds of her cloak as Christian slid it from her shoulders, then shrugged out of his greatcoat and handed both to the waiting Timmons. “If you would my good man, we could use some tea after that drenching.”

“Very good Sir, I shall bring it forthwith to the parlor.” He bowed and started to leave. The front door bursting open and slamming shut had everyone turning. A dripping Robert leaned against the door attempting to catch his breath.

After a few seconds, he pushed away, peeled of his sodden coat, and handed it to the butler. Without preamble he said, “Good you are all here. We need to talk.”

“Timmons, would you be so good as to fetch some towels when you bring in the tea?” Séamas ordered, “I will stoke the fire before the three of you catch your death. Come.” He turned and led the way to the informal parlor in the rear of the house.

The room was considerably smaller than the public rooms, consisting only of a couch, a chaise, a few tables and chairs, and a small writing desk, so the fire Séamas built quickly warmed the room. Samantha, Christian and Robert headed straight for it to chase away the chill. “Robert, are you sure you would not want to change before we proceed?” Samantha asked, her concern apparent in her eyes.

He shook his head, sending a light spray of raindrops as he did, “There is not time.”

“What are you about brother?”

Robert’s face sobered, “Last night after you and your father

left, I gathered the files and started to read through. There were some things that just did not add up, but some things which seemed familiar. I laid awake most the night before I was able to place my finger on it, yet I was not sure even then if I was correct. The pattern of events as well as the signature actions reminded me of another case we were working on, a case where unfortunately we do not have enough evidence to bring the blackguard to heel.

“As coincidence would have it, some of his alleged cohorts were not far from here. So, before dawn, I rode out. You did get the note I left, did you not?” When Liam and Christian nodded, he continued, “As luck would have it, the third place I looked proved fruitful. I was able to hear enough of a conversation to glean Samantha is in imminent danger. The group was convinced she would be able to lead them to their ‘prize’ as they called it, and his lordship would be eternally grateful and pay them handsomely for their efforts.” He paused, cleared his throat, then looked directly into Samantha’s eyes “When they got the information, they would eliminate all loose ends.”

Samantha sucked in a breath at Robert’s last ominous words, her eyes darting to Christian’s then back to Robert. “What do you propose we do?”

“I propose Christian takes you immediately to Derbyshire and leave Donovan, Murphy, your brothers and myself to deal with finding the list and the journal, and with apprehending the group of thugs hell-bent on you.” The planes in Robert’s angular features broke no room for argument, but Samantha’s eyes twinkled as she reached into her pocket and withdrew the list. Across the room Liam cleared his throat, when he had everyone’s attention, he waved the journal in the air.

Robert looked incredulous, “You have found them, both of them?” When nods all around confirmed it he turned to Christian, “Then there is no reason for you not to leave now.”

Christian eyed him carefully, “You feel strongly about this?” Robert’s reply was a curt nod. Christian’s gaze scanned Samantha’s brothers, they, in turn, also nodded their acceptance. He blew out a long breath before he faced Samantha. “I trust his judgment. If Robert is convinced you are in danger if you stay here, than I have to agree. You will need to pack lightly for we will not be able to take the carriage.” He turned to her brothers, “We will depart within the hour. I swear on my life, I will keep her safe.”

Séamas eyed him warily but Liam spoke up as he started writing furiously, “Of that I have no doubt. I have a business relation along the coast to the north. He will, without question, take you in no matter the hour.” He paused as he went to a shelf, removed a red leather bound tome, and placed it on the writing table.

“Samantha, come here.” When she complied, he opened the book, removed the letter opener from the drawer and pried back the edge of the front cover exposing a small linen wrapped object. Slowly he unraveled it, revealing a topaz and diamond ring, then turned to his twin and took her hand, sliding the ring on her finger. Samantha blinked at it, then raised questioning eyes to him. “If you are going to be traveling alone with a man, it will bring far less attention to you if all assume you to be married. Ma always intended you to have it, this seemed to be the appropriate time to give it to you.”

He turned to Christian and handed him the papers he had written and the journal, “These are direction to Angus’, and a note for you to give him when you arrive. Angus will arrange your passage to England as well as a safe place to stay until that passage is secured.”

Christian took the papers, shook his hand and thanked him, then turned to Samantha and raised a brow. She only just succeeded in not raising her hands to rub her now throbbing temples. Her head was spinning, less than half an hour ago she was giddy from finding the list, now she was being hustled off in the dark, in the pouring rain, to England because some unknown entity wanted to kill her.

She should be ranting and raving at their high handedness, she should be demanding they all stay here and lay a trap to catch these scoundrels. She should be doing a lot of things, but she was too numb. Placidly she hugged and kissed each of her brothers in turn, placed a kiss on Robert’s cheek and thanked him, then turned to Christian and took his arm.

With a nod to the men, he led Samantha out the door just as Timmons arrived with the tea trolley. “Timmons, Miss Prichard and I will not be able to stay for tea as we must leave immediately. Would you be so good as to have our horses brought around?”

“As you wish Sir.” Timmons bowed and left the cart where it stood.

Robert followed the couple into the vestibule. After Christian shoed Samantha upstairs to pack a bag, he turned to Robert and clasped his shoulder, “Things could get rough around here, take care.”

“Don’t I always?” They smiled at each other, then he added, “You do the same. God’s speed.”

Christian headed to his room to hastily pack. Within a few moments, Samantha appeared on the steps with a small bag in her hand and the couple descended together. Christian helped her with her pelisse then donned his greatcoat and gloves, took Samantha by the elbow, and they exited Killarn.

True to his word, they were on the road within the hour. The rain had subsided to an icy mist, but the damage to the roads was already done. They were traveling only as quickly as safety would allow, and since they had resigned to stay on the less traveled roads until they were further away from the village, they were barely able to maintain a trot. Christian's mount, a dappled grey gelding, maintained its pace with Samantha's black Arabian mare, another grey was on lead with their meager bags. Christian deemed, with the roads as perilous as they were, their mounts did not need the added weight, although their load was nominal.

An hour before dawn, they reached Wicklow. Thankfully the rain had stopped and now the sky was sprinkled with twinkling stars. Christian dismounted and tied off his horse and the lead before he went to retrieve Samantha who was now slumped in her saddle. He reached up, grabbed her waist, and plucked her from her mount. She slid bonelessly into his arms, "I swear I ache in places I did not even know I had."

Christian gave her a throaty chuckle, "With the exercise you had last night on top of the exertion of this unplanned trek, it does not surprise me in the least."

She gave him a weary smile, "I do not even have the strength to blush."

"Come, let us see about getting you into some dry clothes and a warm bed. I shall fetch our bags after we roust old Angus." Samantha leaned heavily on Christian's arm as they mounted the stairs. He rapped on the door, waited a few moments, when no one answered, he knocked again. "I see a light." Samantha whispered.

"What in bloody hell could possibly be important enough to git me outta me warm bed at this godforsaken hour?" A mountain of a man roared as he nearly ripped the door off its hinges.

Samantha's eyes widened to saucers as she took in the sight of him. He stood well over six feet, filling nearly every inch of space



left by the open door. His white nightshirt barely able to contain his girth, his wiry red hair stood off at various angles, and you could clearly see the glare in his eyes even through the darkness.

Christian cleared his throat before he asked, "Pray my good man, we were hoping you were Angus."

"Who'd be askin'?" He snarled.

Samantha drew a breath and stated, "I am Samantha, Mr. Angus, Liam's sister. We are in a bit of a fix and my brother sent us to you, said you would be willing to help."

The older man blinked, narrowed his eyes, then huffed, "You'd be lookin' more like Séamas than Liam ya do."

"So I have been told." Samantha smiled.

"Well, don't be standing out there in the cold, the two of ye are soaked to the bone Fáilte." He stepped aside and waved them into the house. "Been ridin' all night in the weather have ye? Must be one hell of a fix fer ya to be doin' that. Connor!" He bellowed. "Connor, were are ya boy?"

A bleary-eyed, gangly youth stumbled out of his room, "Yes Papa?"

"We'll be havin' guests boy. Fetch their bags and have the boys tend to their horses. Do it right quick, these two are nearly dead on their feet." Connor scurried out the door, pulling on his coat as he went.

"There was no need to wake the lad, I could have gotten our bags." Christian offered.

"Pah, think nothing of it. The boy will be fast asleep in a few minutes, never remember he were even up." Angus admonished then thrust out his hand, "Angus McConaughy at your service."

"Christian Bradford, a pleasure." He replied as he shook Angus' hand.

The front door opened and Connor tossed their bags into the hall, then left again to tend to the horses, opting to do it himself rather than wake his brothers. As Angus scooped them up he announced, "Ah good, here we go. Now if you follow me, I'll show you to your room. You can tell me what this is all about after ye have

had a proper nights rest.”

He pushed open a door at the end of the hall and strode directly to the fireplace, put the bags down and started a fire. “Well, it’s nothin’ fancy, but it’s clean and you’ll be warm and dry. I’ll see ye when you wake.” He gave them a curt nod and left the room closing the door behind him.

Christian stared at the door for a moment before he said, “Seems to be more than just a business acquaintance of your brother’s for him to treat two complete strangers who show up on his doorstep in the dead of night on just a word from Liam.” Samantha’s shiver had him turn to her. “As Angus said, we will worry about all that when we wake. Come over by the fire.”

He untied the closure to her cape, slipped it from her shoulders and hung it on a hook by the hearth, then nudged her into a chair. As he was shrugging out of his coat, there was a quiet tap on the door, he hung his coat with hers and went to the door. On the floor outside the door was a stack of towels. Smiling he picked them up, closed and locked the door. He laid the towels on the footstool next to Samantha, then rummaged through her bag and extricated a dry chemise. He chuckled when he turned to her, she was nearly asleep in the chair.

Stooping in front of her, he slid off her sodden shoes, then her garters and stockings. He stood raising her with him, turned her and unfastened the buttons of her gown, then peeled the damp garment away from her chilled flesh. He removed her chemise, ran a towel over her damp skin and replaced the saturated chemise with the fresh one, then pulled her onto his lap so he could towel dry her hair.

That done, he scooped her up into his arms, carried her to the bed and settled her beneath the blankets. She never made a peep during his entire ministrations. Christian removed his boots, stockings and only moderately wet clothes, his greatcoat having shielded him from most of the weather, stoked the fire, dried himself then slid naked into the bed. Although he was sure Samantha was asleep, she was shivering, so he curled her into his side. When she snuggled into his warmth and sighed, he too was able to drift into a dreamless slumber.

Samantha awoke with a lazy stretch. She could feel the sun streaming in, warming her face, she borrowed further beneath the blankets, but something did not feel quite right. Grudgingly she opened her eyes and found herself staring at a strange room. She sat up, pushed her tangled hair from her face and looked around. She was in a large four-poster bed in a moderately sized room, which housed an armoire, a dressing table containing her brushes and perfume bottle, two chairs, a footstool and a large fireplace. The room's only remarkable piece of furniture was a massive mirror, which stood a meter from the foot of the bed.

Samantha studied her reflection, a pale frowning sprite in an ocean of blankets. The sight would have been amusing if she was not so disoriented. She blinked as her foggy memory cleared. She had arrived in Wicklow in the wee hours with Christian, and where exactly was Christian? She squinted at the window, the sun was high. It had to be at least noon, far beyond time she woke. The grumble in her stomach expedited her exit from the warm bed.

She puckered her brow as she looked around. She could not find her bags. Curiosity had her opening the armoire and was quite surprised to see her belongings hung neatly alongside Christian's. She selected a pale peach muslin morning gown and laid it on the bed. Intrigued, she went to the dressing table and opened the drawers, the first contained her stockings, garters, the one beneath her chemises, the drawer to the left her riding gloves and such, all perfectly positioned, all neatly placed.

"Humph, I must have been dead to the world if a maid did all this and I heard not a peep." She muttered aloud, then shrugged, dressed, brushed her hair and headed out to forage for some food. As she rounded the stairs, a glorious scent assailed her nostrils and her stomach growled. Her nose led her to a cavernous kitchen.

Upon crossing the threshold Samantha was greeted by a sunny, buxom older woman, "Mrs. Bradford," she bobbed, "I trust you slept well?" she asked as she wiped her floured hands on her apron.

Samantha tried to cover her reaction to being called Mrs. Bradford, "Samantha please, and yes, very well thank you." She stammered.

The woman gave her a knowing smile, "You will get used to being called by your husband's name. Lordy it took me a full two years and I only went from Cunningham to McConaughy." She laughed heartily at Samantha's weary expression. "By the by, I am Katrina, Angus' wife. You must be famished, riding all night as you did. Bet you did not even stop for a proper supper on the way, did you?" When Samantha shook her head, Katrina let out an undignified snort, "Men these days. That is no way to care for a new bride I tell you."

Samantha felt compelled to defend Christian against Katrina's indignation, "Truly it was not as it seems, there were extenuating circumstances. We had to leave immediately."

Katrina gestured dismissively, "Ghastly situation, I know. Who could possibly want to harm someone as sweet as you? Your brothers were right to make him get you out of there, but even with all that, that man of yours should have had enough sense in his head to, to...Ahhh, why do I bother? Heaven knows they do not have the sense of a goat, the whole lot of them. Now eat up, I will not have you wasting away on my watch at least."

Samantha raised her brows at the woman's knowledge of her situation, then stared down at the plate she had put in front of her. It contained the beacon which had summoned her to the kitchen. She closed her eyes and heavily drew in the aroma. Her mouth watered. "It smells delectable. What is it?" She asked as she forked up her first mouthful.

"Spiced peach crepes. My grandmother was born and raised in the hills of France, and probably would have stayed there if my grandfather had not whisked her away to England. Anyway, when I showed an interest in her cooking, she took me under her wing."

Samantha savored the sweet confection, "Well, if it is at all possible, this tastes even better than it smells." Katrina beamed at the praise. "Oh, I want to thank you for unpacking my things for me, it was very kind of you."

"Not I dear. Master Bradford specifically requested you not be disturbed. No one has entered your room." A slow smile dawned on her face, "Maybe that man of yours has some redeeming qualities after

all.”

“Speaking of which, where are they, the men that is?” She asked as she finished the last of her crepes.

“They left a few hours ago, finding you passage I would wager. They should be returning soon. Where are you heading?”

She took a breath and said, “Christian’s brother’s estate in Derbyshire.” If Christian trusted them enough to tell them as much as he had, she would follow his lead.

“You poor dear, you still have three days journey ahead of you, that is providing the men were able to book passage straight away.”

As fate would have it, their passage was secured and leaving with the tide the next day at ten. The gentlemen found the ladies in the kitchen sipping coffee and chatting. Without hesitation, Angus wrapped his arms around his wife’s ample waist and planted a noisy kiss on her upturned cheek. She swatted his arms, “That will be enough of that you brut, you will embarrass our guests.” He kissed her cheek again, then let her go.

Christian smiled at Samantha and offered her his hand, “Come stroll with me. The village is lovely, and the weather is mild.”

“Fine idea, you two go take a little time to enjoy yourselves.” Katrina encouraged, as she steered them to the back door. “Since breakfast was late this morning, we will not be lunching until three. Have a wonderful time children.”

They replied their thanks as they descended the few steps to the back lawn. Christian linked her arm in his and led her toward the path Angus and he had taken that morning. As soon as they were out of earshot, Samantha stated, “Katrina knew an awful lot of our situation. Exactly how much did you tell them?”

“Only as much as they needed to know. However, I felt keeping our story as close to the truth would only make things easier on us.” He slid her a sideways glance then returned his focus on the path ahead.

“Lucky for me, she did not press for details about our wedding. I stammered enough when she called me Mrs. Bradford.” She pointedly kept her eyes forward, Lord only knew what his reaction would be to that little tidbit. It took great effort not to let her

lips quirk when he remained silent.

*Mrs. Bradford*, he let it roll around in his brain for a few moments, bracing himself for the inevitable dread that was sure to come. It did not. He frowned, not willing to analyze the reaction, or lack thereof, and cleared his throat, “A small affair at your grandparent’s home, attended only by your brothers, sister-in-law, their children, my father and brother. We were planning on residing in your ancestral home during the summers and my London townhouse during the season. That is until this unfortunate situation arose and your brothers and I decided it would be best to remove you from the danger and let them handle things. We are staying with my brother in Derbyshire until the dust settles.”

“Well at least my telling Katrina where we were headed did not conflict with anything you said.”

Christian paused and looked at her, a frown marring his handsome features, “I do not recall mentioning our destination during breakfast, but I know I told Angus while we were securing our passage.”

“All the better, if they compare notes, they shall know we separately conveyed the same information.” She nodded and continued to walk, drawing him with her.

After they had strolled a way in amicable silence, Christian asked, “Did the long ride hurt your hand any?”

“It was a little tender last night,” she lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers for him to see, “but it is fine now.”

“Good, good. If you are feeling up to it, when we return we can take a look at the list and compare it against the journal. Maybe we will be able to decipher some of it.”

“Why? We will be with your uncle in a few days. I would rather just hand it over to his safekeeping and be done with the whole matter.” She huffed exasperatedly.

“And let him try to figure out the coding?” He asked shocked.

She stopped and turned to him, “What do you mean? He and that gentleman from France both have copies in their possession as well.”

Christian shook his head, "Of the list yes, but not the journal. Your father was the only one with the journal. The lists are virtually useless without it." He led her to a bench near the waterfront and handed her down. After they sat, he took her hands in his, "Your father implied you were probably the only one who would be able to put all the pieces together." When all she did was stare at their joined hands he added, "If this is truly too taxing, we will do as you said, we shall drop everything in my uncle's lap and let him deal with it."

Before he could finish, Samantha was shaking her head, "No, you are right. My father wanted me to help, so that is what I shall do. But what if...what if I cannot figure out the code? What if..."

"Shh," Christian placed a finger under her chin and nudged her face up until their eyes met, "No one has put any time constraints on you. Read it over then let it go. Just like before, when you are not trying to force it, it will come. Take a week, a month, a year, it does not matter. No one will find you in Derbyshire, you will be safe for however long it takes." He gave her a quick kiss and stood, raising her with him, "Now, let us meander back. Although the day has been mild, the wind is picking up and it will turn cold quickly. We will be back in plenty of time for you to freshen up before lunch."

She stared at him a second before she smiled and inclined her head.

"What?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"You looked as if you wanted to say something." He prodded.

After a pause she said, "It was you, was it not? You unpacked my things while I slept."

"Perfectly acceptable for a husband to assist his wife with such matters, would not you say?"

She faced forward and smiled, "Perhaps."

Lunch was a boisterous affair. The McConaughy children joined them at the table, everyone talked at once, laughed and carried on like they were old friends. The atmosphere did much to lighten Samantha's spirits, so much so, she suggested to Christian they start looking over her father's papers.

They retired to a parlor after Katrina insisted that no guest in her house needed to help clean up, dinner would be at eight, no need to dress for the meal, they did not stand on formality, and she absolutely did not need their help with anything.

"She is quite a woman is she not?" Christian remarked.

"She manages what others would need a house full of servants to accomplish, and she makes it seem effortless."

"The children were a gregarious lot. That Julian was a character. When he started in about that schoolmarm I thought I would bust a gut. Growing up I always wondered what it would have been like to have a big family," he laughed, "loud, very loud, but I guess you already know that."

"Mmm, it did remind me of how it used to be when we were all younger. Suppers when Da was home were the best. He would tell us stories of wherever he had just visited, and more times than not, there was some funny anecdote that would have the lot of us in stitches." She bit her lip and smiled, "We did get rather loud as I recall. What about you? What was it like not being part of a large brood?"

"Quieter for certain. My father and Uncle Aaron were away quite often as well, but Aunt Suzanne tried to make things nice for Anna and me. Growing up in London though, in season, we were mostly tended to by our nurse and then our governess. When my father and Uncle were not off saving the world, they were in the constant whirl of social as well as governmental balls and galas. Although they did not, and still do not, exist as an official government entity, their presence at said events was all but mandated, and



obviously that meant Aunt Suzanne needed to be with them.

“But in the summer when we were at the country estate, those times were wonderful. The two adjoining estates had children our age and all summer long the pack of six of us would circulate between the three homes, treating each as our own. I must confess, looking back four boys and two girls between eleven and twelve did make an awful lot of noise.” He smiled impishly at the confession.

“It seems to me you had the best of both worlds, and faired pretty well at that. No worst for ware?”

He grinned, “No worse for wear.” Their eyes met and she smiled at him, a smile that warmed him straight through. His comfort level with her was startling, he felt he could bear all and she would never judge, felt she could see clear through to his soul and was content with what she saw. It was unnerving and emancipating all at the same time. He took a deep breath, “Are you up to taking a first attempt at your father’s papers?”

“Caught me dragging me feet did ya?” She sighed, “Well, it is said, ‘*once begun is half done*’, so I guess I had better begin if I ever want to be finished.” She looked around for some place to lay out the journal and the list she had been holding. Christian rose from the couch where they were seated and fetched a small table from the corner and positioned it in front of her, then reclaimed his position next to her. She placed the journal on the table, opened it to the first page of her father’s hieroglyphics, then carefully removed the ribbon from the list and unrolled it.

The list was in two parts, the first a list of names, *Henri Depardue, Marie Theresa Charlotte, Jon Bernard de Ard*, and on it went, ninety-six names in all. The second part of the list contained an alphabetical listing of titles, *downwager duchess de Marquette, her Royal Princess, third viscount of the house of the first (blurred word)*, again the list contained ninety-six. “At first glance, I would say each of the names on the first list correspond with a title on the second and the coding in the journal ties the two together with their current identities.”

Christian smiled at her, “Very astute, it appears to be exactly that.”

“Crux of the matter is, I have not a clue who any of these people are let alone what title they held.” She stared down at the lists again frowning.

After some time, Christian reached over and closed the journal. When she looked up in surprise, he gathered the lists and when the parchments had been properly rolled, he held out his hand for the ribbon she had been toying with since she had removed it. He tied the list, laid it and the journal in Samantha's lap, then returned the table to its proper place. Once the task had been completed, he held out his hand to her, "Come, it is getting late. You have done enough for one day."

Bewildered she looked at him. Then, for apparently the first time in hours, she took in her surroundings, daylight had waned. He gave her hand a gentle tug raising her from the couch and they started to walk, "Time passes quickly when you are pondering a puzzle. I shall bring you to our room, you can rest for a spell before supper and that will give me some time to ensure the details for tomorrow's journey are in proper order. I will pen a note to your brothers outlining our progress and see if I can enlist one of Angus' brood to deliver it. Is there anything you would wish for me to tell them?"

When she shook her head he continued, "Very good then, I bid you adieu." He raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them lightly, "Shall I collect you for supper?" When she smiled and nodded, he reached past her and opened the door, then turned and walked away.

Many miles to the south, on blessedly calm seas, a battered but not beaten Ajax limped into port. Her somber captain stood on the bow watching his injured crewmen being helped off the ship to be taken to the local infirmary. They had survived to do battle another day, but at what cost? At what cost?

Dinner turned out to be as raucous an event as lunch had been. The entire McConaughy clan replayed the day's events and their agendas for the next few days. After tea and biscuits, Angus and Katrina excused themselves stating their day started 'before the cock crowed' so they must retire at an unfashionable hour.

Christian smiled as he shook Angus' hand, "Think nothing of it. We shall see you in the morning." Katrina kissed Samantha's cheek and wished her a good night.

When the two departed, Christian and Samantha exchanged an awkward glance. After a moment he cleared his throat and said, "We would be wise to follow their lead, a good night's sleep would do us both some good. We have a few long days ahead of us."

Samantha sighed, "Perhaps you are right." She turned and preceded him from the room.

When they entered the bedroom, Christian went directly to the fireplace to load the peat for the night. With the task completed, he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on the chair, thinking to himself Hugh would be none too pleased with his careless disregard. He turned and found Samantha staring at him from across the room, the firelight casting her in an ethereal glow. He stood transfixed, not knowing how to proceed, not knowing what she wanted or expected. Then, as if sensing his uncertainty, she smiled and reached out her hand. Slowly he crossed the room, never taking his eyes from hers. He took her outstretched hand, brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "You need not feel obligated ..."

His words faded on his tongue when she slid her free hand around his neck and drew his face to hers. Although gentle and tentative, the kiss captured his breath and seized his senses. With a groan, he pulled her into his embrace, deepening their kiss. Without hesitation, her lips parted and instantly she was lost in the sensual dueling of their tongues. He let his hands tangle in the silken glory of her hair, and he relished the contented sound she made when his fingers massaged her scalp.

Slowly he lightened the kiss, then finally broke it only to trail tender kisses across her cheek to the sensitive hollow beneath her ear. Gently he turned her so her back was to his chest, then he whispered, "Open your eyes."

Lazily she complied and found her reflection staring back at her. Mesmerized, she watched his hands slide down her arms, to her hips and thighs before ascending to her belly then up her bodice. With the slightest touch, he circled her breasts with the palms of his hand. She held her breath and enjoyed the sensation of her breast responding even through the fabric of her gown. He kissed the nape of her neck and she shivered. When she closed her eyes and let her head fall back on his shoulder, he rasped, "No, I want you to watch. I want you to see the way your body responds to my touch, to me."

Their eyes met in the reflection, his black, hers molten. She watched as he released the curiously strained buttons of her gown. One by one they came undone. He raised his hands to her shoulders and brushed the fabric aside, the gown slid silkily to the floor. He took his time to caress her curves through her chemise, paused to massage the ripe round globes of her backside then her stomach before he finally untied the obstructive piece of fine linen and let it fall into a pool at her feet with her gown.

She watched his face in the mirror as he took in the sight before him, watched his jaw tighten when his eyes feasted on her exposed breasts, watched him swallow hard when his view traveled lower to the soft curls covering her essence. Seeing his reaction to her, emboldened her. She shifted her feet and kicked the tumble of clothes and her shoes away, then stood there proudly in nothing but her stockings and garters. When she heard him suck in his breath, she found his eyes in the reflection and reached behind her. Her hands clasped his waist on either side, then leisurely slid over his hips and down his legs, then raked her nails over his thighs on the ascent, but stopped just short of her final destination, then repeated the process, feeling his body coil tighter with each stroke.

With a groan he pressed engorged manhood against the small of her back, cursing the material which still covered him, keeping him from feeling her skin against his. He was nearly undone when he felt her hands grasp his buttocks and pull him hard against her. He disentangled himself from her and took a step back, pulled off his boots and hose then removed his shirt, britches and smalls. That accomplished, he slid his hands around her waist and drew her flush against his hot naked body, reveling in the feel of her soft curves

cradling him.

The sensation of his heat at her back made her wither. She squirmed against him, trying to get closer. She found his hands and led them to her breasts, encouraging him to explore, then let out her own groan when he did. She bit back a cry when he rolled her furred nipples between his thumbs and fingers, all the while watching his every move in the mirror facing them. Her eyes followed his tanned hands as they made their way over her ivory skin to the place where she ached most to feel his touch.

He lifted her against him and took a step back so he could sit on the foot of the bed, then he drew her onto his lap, gently spreading her legs until they straddled his. Her breath caught at the sight of her blatantly exposed body, but before any thought of embarrassment could enter her mind, his skillful fingers started to move and she was mesmerized yet again. His feathery touch traveled over the tops of her thighs to her knees then returned via her inner thighs. He repeated the journey over and over with slightly more pressure, each time getting closer, each time falling short of their goal, a goal which was now a pulsing fire in need of being quenched.

She reached back, laced her fingers through his hair, and tugged none too gentle, wordlessly begging him to end her torment. Her back arched and she threw her head against his shoulder when he made his first swipe over her curls. She felt his hot breath against her ear as he softly growled but one command, "Watch".

It took all her strength to lift her head and open her eyes, eyes which were finding focusing a might beyond their ability. Her image slowly became clearer and she was wickedly pleased at the reflection of the sultry siren staring back at her. Her breath seized as she watched his fingers spread her silken folds and disappear into her, first one finger then two. His hand flexed on her thigh, nudging her legs further apart while his fingers began their cadence of plunge and retreat. Of their own volition, her hips picked up the rhythm and met each thrust, drawing him further into her fiery sheath. A small gasp escaped her lips when his thumb circled her swollen bud. The sensation raced through her body. Her breath came in short pants. She strained against his hand, silently asking, begging.

The increasingly harried rocking of her hip was nearly Christians undoing. With every tilt, her luscious bottom would stroke his now engorged erection. Ignoring her whimper, he eased his fingers from her, firmly grasped her hips, lifted her and slowly embedded

himself within her. Her low moan of pleasure was muffled by his own. He felt her tighten around his invasion then shatter into a million pieces. He gritted his teeth to fight the effects of her climax rippling around him. When she started her slow descent to earth, he placed her hands on his knees and bent her legs so they were next to his on the bed, then he laid back. His hands on her hips started her gently riding him, when she established a tempo, he released her and gave her the reins.

The implication of his gesture penetrated her euphoric haze. He was allowing her to pleasure them, relinquishing all control, placing himself at her mercy. She banished any thought of her inexperience and let instinct guide her. She paused, rose up until he almost left her body, then slowly descended, taking him fully into her. When she was impaled to his hilt, she rocked back and forth leisurely and was rewarded with his sharp intake of breath and a guttural groan.

Emboldened, she repeated the process over and over until he could not stand it anymore, grabbed her hips, swung the two of them around, pressed her back into the mattress and reentered her. Gone was the malleable male from a few minutes before, hovering above her was a fierce untamed animal, all harsh angles and planes, eyes black with passion, jaw clenched from reining in his baser instincts, lips drawn into a tight thin line. She should have been afraid or at least weary, but she reveled in the fact she could strip him of all his polish, exposing his true fervor. He drove them hard to the highest peak then pushed them crashing over the edge like copious waves pounding a rocky coast during a storm.

Truly and completely spent he crumpled atop her and she welcomed his weight, gently stroking his back as they fought to catch their breath. Her labored breathing ruffled the hair by his ear but when he attempted to rise, she held firm. All the better he thought for he was not sure if his arms could hold him. Never before had a woman so totally sapped him of his strength, he felt weaker than a newborn foal, yet surprisingly as strong as Zeus himself.

*What strange powers this tiny Celtic witch has over me.* He mentally shook his head, relieved himself of such fanciful thoughts, and scooped up Samantha's boneless body as he rose from the bed. With one hand he tossed the blankets to one side, settled her comfortably on the bed then followed, rearranged the blankets about them, snuggled her securely at his side, and finally whispered, "We have a long day ahead of us, get some sleep". Heeding his own advice,

he did just that and was able to enjoy the sleep of the utterly replete.

The new day dawned cold but clear. Christian and Samantha thanked their host and hostess then bade them a fond farewell. Katrina gathered Samantha in a motherly hug and whispered in her ear, "The road ahead may be rough child, but gain your strength knowing that man beside you will see you through. I can see in him what I had seen in Angus all those years ago." She kissed Samantha's cheek, pressed a basket of food into her hand, then smiling at the tears in the younger woman's eyes, concluded by saying, "God's speed my sweet child, God's speed."

Christian gathered their bags in one hand and Samantha's hand in his other, gave a final nod to Angus and Katrina, and headed off toward the town. It was a short distance to the docks. They should make it to their ship with plenty of time to spare. Earlier this morning, Angus assured him Connor would return their horses and his letter to Samantha's brothers. With all loose ends tied up, he could, in good conscience, leave Ireland behind and look toward the challenge which lay ahead in England.

Blessedly the two day voyage was uneventful, a rarity for sure to have calm seas at this time of year. When they disembarked, two fine pieces of horseflesh were waiting for them, undoubtedly compliments of Sir Aaron. They rode until sunset and stayed at an inn only to leave again at the crack of dawn. Over lunch on the third day, Christian proposed two options, they could either stop again at sunset as they had done before or they could ride into the night, reaching Wingate at around midnight. As tired as Samantha was, she opted to ride on, eager to reach safety.

True in his estimations, they turned their horses into the gates of Wingate just shy of midnight. Upon hearing the horses' upon the gravel drive, a sleepy James met them, "Master Christian, you have made it at last. Does this old heart good to see you here hale and whole!"

"Thank you James. If you would tend to the horses, I shall see Miss Prichard and myself in." Christian gave his horse's withers a final stroke, "Make sure these two get some extra oats and a thorough



rubdown, we pushed them hard to be able to arrive tonight. They deserve a little added reward for their services.”

“Of course Sir. I think you will find several still awake and in the study. They were staying up for a while in the off chance you would arrive tonight.”

As if hearing James’ words, the front door opened. “Christian, Miss Prichard you have arrived! Come, come. The house has been in a thither worried for your safety.”

As they mounted the stairs Christian extended his hand to the craggy old butler, “Andrews, oh but are you a sight for these weary eyes. Made the trip back with Kathryn did you?” He slapped him on the back, nearly toppling the old man. “Been riding lately?”

Andrews harrumphed at Christian’s reference to his last encounter on horseback, “I will thank you not to remind me, at my advanced years, the only way I should be traveling in is a nicely cushioned coach, I will tell you that.” He complained as he held the door for them. “Now, leave your things here and I shall see they are brought up to your rooms. Although I am sure this is the last thing you want to hear, but everyone has been waiting up for you. You have arrived just before they were going to call it quits.”

“More fool me for rushing.” Christian grumbled. He extended his arm to Samantha and said, “The quicker we get this over with, the quicker we shall be able to find our beds.” With a weary nod, Samantha took his arm and allowed him to lead her to the study.

They were quite surprised when they opened the doors. Seated in front of the hearth were Uncle Aaron, William and, a man he assumed was Monsieur de la Rues, at the chess board were Kathryn, with her back to the room, and his father. “Quite a reception for us arriving nary in the middle of the night.” Christian chimed.

A wide grin split Graydon’s face as he stood and made his way to his son. “Well, well, did not waste any time in Ireland did you boy? Hard to believe you accomplished all you needed in such a short time.”

“Well our exodus was a bit preempted, but yes, we did in fact accomplish our major goal.” Christian smiled as he now found Samantha and himself surrounded by the gentlemen in the room, each anxious to hear their tale. “Since it is obvious we will not get any peace this night before we have elucidated every detail, I must first

demand we be seated. I am sure Samantha will concur, two days of sea travel followed by two days of hard riding tend to turn the legs to mush, and personally I would rather not embarrass myself by falling to a heap on the floor.” Samantha raised her eyebrow at his comment knowing full well he was capable of a month’s worth of hard riding without any ill effects, but was far too grateful for the gesture to utter a word.

“By all means.” Aaron stepped aside and with a sweep of his hand had the others parting like the Red Sea so they could all settle into more comfortable surroundings. When their view became unobstructed, Kathryn rather shyly turned to greet her stepson, trepidation apparent in her eyes. Christian’s eyes rounded at her obviously increasing figure then let out a whoop and went to her, wrapping her in a bear hug and planting a juicy smack on her cheek.

When he released her and clasped her hands, she stared at him in utter amazement. Not releasing her he turned to his father who was looking quite sheepish, “You old dog, why did you not tell me?” Not waiting for an answer, he turned back to Kathryn “You look wonderful. Are you feeling well? Have you had an easy time? The trip was not too taxing for you? Am I finally going to have the baby sister I have always wanted?”

Kathryn could not help but laugh, she threw her hands up in surrender. “Thank you, yes I am feeling marvelous, a far cry from the last two times, the trip was a little tiring but not taxing, and finally you will have to wait until the end of March, beginning of April to find out.” She gasped to catch her breath and smiled at him, still stunned he took the news so well. Much better than William did for sure, he looked as though he was going to be physically ill. Glancing at her youngest son, he still looked in shock. “Robert does not know yet, so if you see him before I do...”

“Fear not, I will not utter a word.” He bent and kissed her cheek again before releasing her so she could sit by her husband.

“Well, now that that is out of the way, do tell us what brought you here so quickly. By your cryptic comments, I assume you have found the list and the journal, yes?”

“Yes Sir Aaron we have, but Christian and I have studied them both and cannot figure them out. We were hoping when we arrived, you and Monsieur de la Rues would be able to shed some light on what my father wrote.”

“Oh, if it were only so simple Mademoiselle.” All eyes turned to the Frenchman, “You see neither Sir Aaron nor myself know the key to the partial lists we possess. Your father was a very clever man. He was the only one in possession of the journal and the full list.”

“Be that as it may,” Christian interrupted, “when you see what is in the journal and compare it to the list, you may find you will be able to decipher the code.”

“He is correct, Monsieur. The list seems to be encoded names of the émigrés, surely you Sir would have greater knowledge of your countrymen than either Christian or I.”

Jean Pierre pondered the thought for a moment before he nodded, “Perhaps there is hope then, no? But after such a harrowing journey, it can be left to another day. Finish your tale so you can go to bed, and we shall leave the puzzle until tomorrow when we have all been rested. Fair enough?”

“That sounds like an excellent idea Jean Pierre. Christian, I may as well warn you, your Aunt will more than likely be arriving in the next day or so. Heaven knows I cannot keep her away when all the excitement is somewhere else.” His uncle rolled his eyes heavenward eliciting chuckles from all who knew Suzanne. “Needless to say you will be required to recite a complete blow-by when she gets here. Do not bother abridging anything, she will just worm it out of one of us anyway. I see you smiling over there Samantha, do not think for one moment you will not be grilled by my wife as well.”

She giggled, “I shall be more than happy to expound on our adventures to date, Sir Aaron.”

He smiled at her, “Well, now with that aired, I suggest we all retire for the evening, tomorrow will be upon us sooner than we wish.”

They all readily agreed and headed upstairs. Christian put a staying hand on his father, who gave Kathryn a kiss on the cheek and told her he would be up shortly. When the room was vacated, Christian asked without preamble, “Are you alright?”

“What makes you ask?” At Christian’s raised eyebrow, Graydon exhaled and sat heavily in a chair. “Needless to say we never expected this turn of events. I am overjoyed and at the same time scared witless.” He looked up at his son with troubled eyes, “I have waited my whole life for Kathryn, I do not know what I would do if

something happened to her...”

When his father’s voice cracked and he bowed his head, Christian said, “Kathryn is a strong woman in excellent health. She has already had two healthy children and she had them when she was very young. I would think a far more dangerous time to have them than now. She will do famously and so will my little sister!”

Graydon looked at his son and afforded him a weak smile, “Thank you for treating her so well, after the reception William gave her, she was extremely worried about facing you and Robert. You gave her hope it would all work out.”

“I can safely say she will have much the same reaction from Robert as she did from me. Believe it or not, we teased each other of who would be the Godfather when you two had children.” Christian gave his father an impish grin, “We decided that if it was a girl, I would be and if it was a boy he would be.”

Graydon laughed as he rose, “Oh, did you now? Well what if I said it will be whichever of the two of you marries first?”

“Then I would say that babe best not be born anytime in the next several years!” The two separated on the landing and headed off to their respective rooms. Christian paused at his door, realizing he had no idea which room they put Samantha in, all the better, she was probably too exhausted for his company tonight anyway. He entered his room, undressed and slipped between the sheets. He tried lying on one side, then the other, then his stomach, finally his back letting out a frustrated gush of air through his teeth. He folded his arms under his head and stared up at the canopy. It was going to be a long night.

It was dark, so dark. The smell of smoke and death would not leave, it was permeating the air, surrounding him, choking him. The pain was unbearable, consuming, but he needed to push on. The men needed him. He was frightened, he could admit that to himself. If Michael were here, he would have known what to do, but Michael was not here, Michael was dead. His brother, his only family was gone. He was alone, no one to turn to, no one to help him.

He thrashed, trying to fight his way out of the darkness, out of the pain, out of the crushing sense of despair. He could hear a voice in the distance but could not make out the words, yet the tone was somehow soothing. He felt a cool gentle hand upon his face, but how could that be? He could see no one. He must be dreaming, but in dreams there was no pain, was there? He could not move, he tried to lift his arms but they would not move. He was trapped, it was becoming harder and harder to breathe. He needed to calm down or he would die in this hell. Alone. But he was not alone, he could still feel the hand on his face.

His mouth was as dry as the desert, swallowing painful. The more he tried, the worse it became. He felt soothing liquid trickle down his arid throat. Where did it come from? He did not care, he needed more and was instantly rewarded with another spoonful, then another. The final spoonful tasted strange, it burned going down. Poison, it must be poison. He thrashed but could not break free. His last thought before slipping away to nothingness was *so this is how it ends*.

“How is he?” The surgeon whispered to the young nurse.

Elyse turned troubled eyes on the older man, “He still rages with fever. I was able to spoon some water into his mouth before I gave him the laudanum. He is resting now.”

“Good, best thing for him. If we can get that fever down, he has a good chance at pulling through this. He is strong and otherwise healthy, and heaven knows he is a fighter. Stay with him and if there is any change, call for me.”

“Yes Sir.” Elyse did not need to be told to stay with him, she had not moved in nearly three days. She bathed him with cool rags every hour, she changed his dressings, she slept in the chair by his cot, she was instantly at his side to sooth him when he cried out from one of his nightmares. Each time her heart broke for him, the horrors this poor man must have witnessed. There were plenty of other patients in the ward, but for the life of her, she could not bear to leave his side. The only time he seemed to rest peacefully was when she spoke to him or wiped the sweat from his brow.

Elyse knew the doctor was right, if he could just break free of the fever, he would be fine, but the knowledge did not keep her from worrying. His left side sustained all of the injuries. The burns, cuts and bruises on his back, arm and leg were already healing, as was gash in his thigh where they removed the splintered wood, but she knew he was still in a great deal of pain. Even asleep, he winced when he made the slightest movement. The night before he had inadvertently turned on to his back, and howled in agony, which prompted Elyse to fashion a long roll out of blankets and wedged it beneath him, propping him firmly on his right side. When the doctor first saw his patient’s new pose, he had questioned her, only upon hearing her explanation, complimented her on her ingenuity.

A whimper came from the bed. She knelt beside him and began stroking the hair from his face as a mother would do for her sick child, “Hush now and rest. You need all your strength to fight this fever. And fight it you must, for there are things I need to know, and only you coming back will get them answered. Like what is your name? You look like a Michael but I know that cannot be for you have called out for him in your dreams. I wonder is he a friend or your brother. Are your eyes as dark as your hair or as vivid as the sea you love? Why was it when you came in with the other men injured from the Ajax, none of them knew you? Is there any chance that in your travels you have come across my brother? I have not heard from him in over a year and I am worried, he is all I have left.” She sniffled and swallowed, “So you see, I have much you need to answer so you must fight, you must come back...come back to me.”

Turned out Samantha was not the only slugabed the next morning. She met Kathryn on her descent to the dining room. Kathryn laced her arm through Samantha's, "So my dear, how are you fairing?"

"Honestly, if I just keep at it I am fine. I fear though when all is said and done I may very well crumple."

"And no one could blame you." She shook her head, "Drama definitely seems to follow these men around. When we have some time alone, perhaps when Suzanne arrives, I shall tell you the story of how Graydon and I met and you will see exactly what I mean."

The women entered the dining room arm and arm and were greeted with smiles from the men as they stood. Waving them back to their seats, the ladies helped themselves to ham, eggs, kippers and toast, then seated themselves amongst the men. "Seems as though everyone slept in if we are all still at the breakfast table at this hour." Kathryn commented. "Perhaps it is just what we all needed."

"Seems so." Aaron agreed. "When everyone has finished with their meal, what do you say to remaining here to recount all we know thus far and to take our first look at the journal and list you brought?"

"Sir Aaron I must ask," Samantha started quietly. "Why do we need to decipher the code? If the journal and list are worth killing for and if they fall into the wrong hands countless lives could be lost, why do we not just destroy the things? We have all the copies here, why can we not just toss them into the hearth and be done with the whole matter?"

"If I may Aaron?" Jean Pierre interrupted, "The code must be broken if we have any chance of protecting the very people on the list. Most of the people are members of the Royal family, some distant for sure, but still nobility. If the unrest ever ceases in my homeland, these very people would be able to reclaim power, on the other foot, if the situation in France deteriorates further, these same people will be able to help your government if the need arises. This explains it well

Aaron, no?"

"Quite well Jean Pierre. You see Samantha, although we can speculate, we do not know for sure who has settled in England fleeing persecution, or who may be here for more nefarious reasons. The list your father compiled is those we need to protect. Some of which when they fled brought with them the secrets which would prove beneficial if we are faced with an all-out war, and if at all possible, enabling us to keep the fighting off our shores. Needless to say, if the whereabouts of said people were discovered, they would be in grave danger."

"Then it is settled. We need to figure out who is on the list, and where they can be found. Christian, I believe both are in your bags." Having already finished his breakfast he nodded and left the room. Samantha continued, "Monsieur de la Rues, as I stated last night, your knowledge of your countrymen may be our only hope in cracking this riddle. When Christian and I looked over the list it appeared each of the names on the first part of the list correspond with a title on the second part of the list and the coding in the journal ties the two together with their current identities. There are ninety-six names in all."

William perked up at the thought of solving a puzzle, definitely his forte, "Even if Monsieur de la Rues can identify one or two of the people, it may be enough for us to crack the code. I know, for a fact, my father collected numerous tomes on foreign dynasties all of which are in the library. Although, he has been gone for some time, perhaps there are some of the older émigrés who may be mentioned."

"Certainly worth looking into Son. Why do you not see if you can locate any of the books while we have a look at the list and journal." Aaron advised.

William passed Christian on his way out. "He is looking like the cat who caught the canary. What is he about?"

Graydon's lips quirked, "Puzzle solving." Christian gave him a knowing grin and placed the items on the table in front of Samantha. "Perhaps it would be more beneficial if we copy the list over so we are not standing over each other."

"Capital idea. Two should be enough for now and we will split into teams, Kathryn and Graydon you take one, Samantha and Christian you take another and Jean Pierre and I will take the final copy. Andrews, would you fetch us some parchment, pens and ink?"



“At once Sir.”

“Oh and Andrews, if you feel you could enlighten us any in this matter, by all means feel free to look on. I know you are the epitome of discretion and in possession of an extremely sharp mind.”

“I thank you Sir for your confidence. Although I doubt I can be of any assistance, I would be most honored to have a look. I shall fetch you your supplies.” The old man practically beamed as he exited the room.

Kathryn smiled at her brother-in-law, “That was very kind of you. Not many would treat a servant with such respect.”

“Baron or butler, he is still a man and I did not say anything which was not the truth. I have seen the man handle crisis unruffled and I know firsthand of his intelligence. He has trounced me more than once across the chess board. He is a strategic thinker, and as far as I can see it, we could only benefit from one more sharp mind on the case. Besides, if he has earned your undying devotion, dear sister, then he has earned mine as well.”

Andrews heard the end of Sir Aaron’s praise when he entered the room and his cheeks pinked. Flustered, he placed the supplies in front of Samantha and took a seat next to Kathryn who smiled and patted his veiny hand. Samantha handed the first page of the list to Kathryn and Graydon while she kept the second page for Christian and herself. “Sir Aaron, why don’t you and Monsieur de la Rues take a look at the journal while we are transcribing?”

“Jean Pierre, mon petite, if you would. I have brought my copy of the list as well as I am sure Sir Aaron has, although we have never compared, they may make more sense when together.”

The next hour was spent in virtual silence, the only sound in the room was the scratching of the pens upon the paper and the occasional question when something on the page was unclear. “Pardon Samantha, do you have Maria Theresa Charlotte on your list?”

“We do, Jean Pierre. Why?” Graydon asked.

“She is the eldest daughter of Louis the XVI and Marie Antoinette, but that cannot be. She is said to have fled to Vienna, then to Mittau, Courland with her uncle, but that was in ‘94. Aaron did not Nathaniel say all the people upon this list were in London or near?”

“Jean Pierre, our list has ‘Her Royal Princess’.” Christian offered.

Jean Pierre stared unseeing with glazed eyes, “But how can this be? How?”

“Perhaps after the reign of terror, she found refuge here before moving on to Vienna...” Before Samantha could finish, Jean Pierre was shaking his head, “As per your father, this list is current as of the spring. He verified each entry, met with most. If she is here, then who married Louis-Antoine in ’99?” When he started muttering to himself in French, Aaron asked if the transcriptions were completed, when all nodded, he suggested a break which everyone readily agreed. The morning had proved interesting if nothing else.

They reconvened after lunch. William found three tomes on French aristocracy, the oldest dated back to the sixteen hundreds, “Provided these are accurate, we should be able to trace the lineage of most on your list. If I may, I would like to look at the Journal.”

“Of course,” Samantha slid the journal across the table. “The only clue we have so far, much to Jean Pierre’s dismay, is the reference on the first list to Maria Theresa Charlotte, and on the second list to Her Royal Princess. This seems to confirm the correlation between the first list and the second. The first is a list of names and the second is their title. Which means, if we can match the two, and decipher the code in the journal; we will be able to identify their new identity, and where they can be found.”

“In fact, and Jean Pierre correct me if I am mistaken, if that is the case, then the list which is in my possession would make more sense. My list contains forty-eight numbers, in random sequence with what appear to be addresses. I assume yours is the same Jean?” Upon the Frenchman’s nod, Aaron continued, “I have to admit Samantha, your father was a very clever man, not that I ever doubted that fact mind you. The chances of the first two lists and the journal being found was remote enough but then compound it with the location of the émigrés being divided between myself and Jean Pierre, which until recently were in two different countries, and finally encrypting the key, he seemed to have taken every precaution this information not fall into the wrong hands.”

“Be that as it may Brother, with the recent attempt on your life and Jean Pierre’s, and with the trouble Samantha and my son recently encountered, the villain is getting close to doing just that.” Graydon voiced what they were all thinking. “It would behoove us to settle this mystery post haste, and take appropriate measures in securing the whereabouts of all the information.”

“Or...” Andrews interrupted, “Excuse me, but I had a thought.”

“By all means, that is the reason you are here my good man.

Please proceed.”

“If we were able to interpret the code and then alter it somehow, we might just be able to lead these culprits on a merry chase.” Andrews looked at the group hopefully, then felt vindicated when smiles played upon the lips of the operatives present.

“See,” Aaron announced, “I knew it was a good idea to include you! But first and foremost, we need to figure this mess out before we can contemplate our next plan of attack. Let us see what we come up with, shall we?”

Andrews and William buried their noses in the journal while the others compared the list. As anticipated, Jean Pierre was instrumental in matching several of the names to their titles. At one point Samantha requested the journal and started flipping through the pages until she found what she was looking for, furrowed her brow and muttered, “It could not possibly be as simple as that could it?” Instantly all eyes were upon her.

“Speak up Dear, what do you see?” Aaron ordered.

“I kept coming back to Maria Theresa Charlotte. The journal has an entry Modiste 13 – h RP, MTC. What does the list of addresses show for number thirteen?”

Aaron and Jean Pierre consulted their list, “It refers to 911 Bond Street.” Jean Pierre supplied.

“Bond Street, known for its modistes who cater to the haute *ton*, is it not Kathryn? h RP – Her Royal Princess, MTC – Maria Theresa Charlotte.”

A stunned silence spread around the room as everyone stared at Samantha, then in a flash, it erupted with everyone speaking at once. William prevailed over the din, “Let us try her theory. Jean Pierre read me the name of one you identified and their title and I will cross reference it with the journal.”

“Chevalier De Lauzun, Comte De Rochembeau, but again, how can this be? He has been dead, hanged, ten years at least.”

Graydon furrowed his brow, “Was he not the one who was rumored to have worked with that American General, Washington was it not?”

“Yes,” Aaron confirmed. “We have documented

correspondences between him and the then soon to be American president. But I must agree with Jean Pierre, how could his name be on the list if he has been dead for ten years?"

"Twelve to be exact," William interjected, then explained. "If I am interpreting this correctly, according to this section of the journal he died in '93, but his nephew Jean is an apothecary at address 43 on the list."

"So now there is a code within the code?" Christian asked.

"Not exactly, the coding is the same. I would venture a guess in saying the fourteen people in this section of the journal passed information on to relations before their passing, with the intention of it not falling into the wrong hands." William surmised. "We still have ninety-six alive and well, with an added tie in to the fourteen who have perished since the creation of the list."

"So the other thirteen names have a relative listed with them?" When William confirmed with a nod, Aaron continued, "Then I suggest William, you start by reading off the first code while we each scan the lists for the names and titles, those found, Jean Pierre and I will supply the addresses. Kathryn, would you compile a complete list as we identify them?"

"And what would you have me do Husband, stand here and look gorgeous?" came the husky Scottish brogue of a blue eyed, ginger haired beauty from the doorway.

Aaron smiled and greeted his wife with a kiss. "As usual my dear, your timing is impeccable. I will ask you to forestall your hellos until after we have completed this task. We are too close to stop now."

"Of course. Andrews don't you dare get up! I assure you my coat and bags will not perish if they remained in the vestibule for a while." Taking the chair next to her husband, Suzanne addressed the gathering, "Now what can I do to help?"

It was three hours before Suzanne could give her hellos. After greeting her husband with a proper kiss and extricating a promise from him she would be brought up to speed before dinner, Kathryn and she accosted Samantha and headed to the parlor. "Now my dear, I have not seen you since you were nothing but a snippet, you must tell me how you have been fairing. I am not talking about this," she fluttered her hands about, "situation. I am sure you are tired of the whole sordid affair, I shall get that from Aaron. I want to hear

about you, your brothers, and what is going on between you and my nephew.” At Samantha’s raised eyebrows she continued. “Do not pretend there is nothing going on. I have eyes, and I see the way he looks at you. Now no vacillating, tell all.”

Samantha had absolutely no intentions of telling all, so she took a page from Christian’s book and told just what she thought would appease his curious, yet all too astute aunt, “With the exception of my mother passing four years ago and my father’s recent death, the family has been well. Patrick is now married with two children, and Liam and Séamas have taken over my grandparents’ estate and are dabbling in breeding horses and foreign imports. As for Christian, he saved me from the men who killed my father, escorted me safely first to my home and then here, and honestly without his help I do not think I would have ever found my father’s list and journal. I owe him my gratitude.”

Suzanne harrumphed and exchanged a knowing glance with Kathryn, “Gratitude is hardly the issue, but I accept that is all you are willing to give me at this time. After all, you do not know me, but you will in time.” She softened her words with a smile and turned her attention on her sister-in-law and how the pregnancy was going. After Kathryn satisfied Suzanne she, as promised, told the story of how Graydon and she met and the drama which had unfolded a mere eight months before. Samantha sat wide-eyed as the women recounted their rescue of Anna, Suzanne and Aaron’s daughter, from a group of kidnappers.

“What are the chances of actually finding a puppy during your diversion? Amazing you were not caught.”

“Looking back, it was rather amazing was it not? You will be happy to know Finnegan, the puppy, is still with us. He is a hairy mongrel for sure, but lovable.” Suzanne laughed. “Enough of dredging up the past. What do you say we see what the men are about?”

The men were right where they had left them, sitting around the dining room table discussing strategies for their next course of action, but not coming to any firm conclusions. “We are spinning our wheels,” Aaron confessed, “We have had an unusually productive day, perhaps it is best if we table this discussion until tomorrow morning when we have all had a chance to sleep on it.”

“I think we should wait until Robert arrives.” Christian interjected. “Before we left, he was working out a theory on who is behind this, and who knows, if he was able to stop the gang who was

after Samantha, perhaps he was able to extricate some information as to their benefactor.”

“Be that as it may, we should not sit idle in the hopes he has uncovered something. We can still map out a course of action then alter it if needed when Robert arrives. There are certain things we can set in motion no matter who our villain is, but as I said before, that is a matter for a different day. It is half past five and dinner is at eight. That gives us time to relax and think of anything other than this.” Aaron made eye contact with each member in the room, “I want your word that no one will speak a word of this until after lunch tomorrow. We can meet at two, right here, and I look forward to hearing your ideas at that time. Now, I have not seen my wife in over a week and I intend to find out what she has been about, so if you will excuse us, we shall see you at dinner.” With that said, he took his wife’s hand, threaded it through the crook of his arm and exited the room.

“Considering my brother has effectively tabled this until tomorrow, I suggest you, my dear, get some rest. We would not want you taxing yourself.”

“Ah yes Graydon, for writing is a truly grueling task, I find myself quite weary indeed.” Kathryn placed the back of her wrist against her forehead in a flourish and sighed, then ruined her flawless acting by giggling, then squealing when her husband wrapped her in a hug and spun her toward the door. One by one the others made their excuses and departed the room leaving Samantha and Christian alone.

Sensing Samantha was restless, Christian offered, “Care for some fresh air?”

“Actually, I think I would.” They gathered their coats and proceeded through the library doors, which emptied into the side gardens. They wandered the path, absently commenting on how lovely the gardens must be in the spring and summer. Now with the exception of a few hearty mums and some evergreens, it was reduced to a ghost of seasons past. “Sad is it not?”

Christian raised a questioning brow, “What is?”

“That it all has to die.” She replied as she looked wistfully at her surroundings.

He smiled and laced his fingers in hers, “Yes, but if it never died, we would take the beauty for granted, eventually not even noticing it is there. However, since the blooms do die off in the fall,

every spring we get to experience the awe of new birth, of an awakening, of a fresh start. Without death, we would never truly appreciate life.”

She squeezed his hand, “You are right. I know you are, it is just...I do not know, perhaps the scenery just matches my mood too precisely. It is hard to look to spring when you are not even through the autumn yet and everything around is bleak.”

Christian halted their meandering and turned her toward him. Cupping her chin, he gently made her look at him, “No matter how bleak or dreary the autumn is, spring will always come, and with it the beauty and magic that is life.” He brushed a fleeting kiss on her lips then said, “Now I know it is not these gardens that have you so pensive, and although I can venture a pretty good guess what has gotten you so melancholy, I would rather hear it in your own words.”

She sighed, then took a moment to gather her thoughts before she replied. “I guess today was a bit anticlimactic. Somehow, as unrealistic as this may sound, I thought that when we deciphered my father’s code, everything would fall into place. We would know who to protect and who the culprit was, and everything would all make sense, but I do not feel as if we are any better off now than we were two weeks ago. All we have done is discovered my father was a clever puzzler.”

“Oh, but there you are wrong. Since you were able to solve that puzzle, we now potentially have ninety-six more people who can help us find the person or people responsible for your father’s death. Also, each of these people holds some form of information that may save countless numbers of lives were we to advance to an all-out war with France. And before you say it, I do realize it is splitting hairs saying this is not an all-out war already, however, they have not breached our borders. Now, that is all I shall say on the subject, because I am not one to disobey a direct order from my uncle and I would swear on all that is holy, the man has eyes and ears everywhere. Come, I will show you where my father and Kathryn met. Have you heard the story?”

As they walked to the bluff, Christian filled Samantha in on the few details Kathryn and Suzanne omitted, the largest omission was how Kathryn saved his father’s life one more time when she killed her attacker when he had leveled a pistol on Graydon. “She refused to reenter the room, so Robert has since removed all the furnishings and had the room closed up permanently. He says let the next owners



figure out what to do with the room, as if he would ever part with his townhouse.”

“You never know, he could fall in love with some beautiful woman and run away with her to some far off land.”

“Knowing my brother, that could be very likely.” He chuckled. They paused for a moment at Robert and William’s father’s grave and Christian explained the family history, then he led her to where Kathryn found Graydon. As they crested the hill, they saw James and a stable lad leading three horses to the barn. James called out to them, “Lord Robert has just arrived. He said he will see you at dinner.” The butterscotch colored mare he was leading dug in all fours and stopped when she saw the two of them arrive. “Now don’tya be given me no gruff their Missy. Let’s go. Dang you blasted animal...” James grumbled but hushed when Samantha started to croon to the animal and rub its velvety nose.

“Pay him no mind sweetness, I know you just wanted to say hello. There is a good girl. Now tell me Caramel, who did you bring with you, Séamas or Liam? Poor thing, you are probably out of sorts, I cannot believe one of those mutton-headed brothers of mine would have subjected you to a boat trip just so they could have their comfortable ride.” As if understanding every word, Caramel nodded her big head then began to nuzzle Samantha, blatantly looking for sympathy.

“So she is one of yours?” Christian asked.

Samantha smiled, “So are the other two, but she is my favorite. Aren’t you girl? Now you go on with James here and do not be causing him no grief. If you are a good girl, I shall smuggle you a treat later, and maybe in the morning we can go for a run. How does that sound?” The beast nodded her head again and snorted, then placidly strolled off in James’ wake.

Christian was shaking his head, “Alright, it took a while for me to comprehend your, shall we say, gift, but I now do and I have made peace with that, but if you think for one minute I will be able to believe you can talk to animals....”

Samantha’s eruption of giggles stopped him mid-sentence. “Fear not, you silly man. No, I cannot claim I can talk to animals. I have a way with them true, but no different than the rest of my family or you for that matter. I have seen you around horses and they react to you in much the same way, and I hear Graydon is the same way

with, how did Kathryn phrase it, the possessive beast he rides. I could have been reciting the recent acts of Parliament as long as I did it in a certain tone and Caramel would have reacted the same way.”

Christian took her hand and, still chuckling, he said, “Fair enough. Why don’t we head back to the house and get ready for dinner? All this fresh air has made me quite famished.”

He was still grinning when they reached the door, “What is it?” She prompted.

“Hmm, oh, I was just thinking that was the first time I have heard you laugh, I mean really laugh. It was nice.”

She gave him a brilliant smile, “It felt good too.”

Sean slowly resurfaced, subconsciously knowing if he did not move the pain would not get any worse. Cautiously, moving nothing but his eyelids, he opened his eyes. So far so good, no shooting pain. The room was dimly lit, there were hushed voices a short distance behind him, but he dared not turn to see. Instead he focused his sight on the sleeping figure in the chair beside his cot. She was young, perhaps nineteen or twenty, of slight build, cheekbones high, full mouth, almost too full for her tiny face.

Her raven hair was pulled back from her face into a severe knot at her nape. She would not be described as pretty, not in the classical sense of the word, exotic perhaps would be more appropriate. Although obviously pale, he could see her skin had more an olive hue rather than the traditional English ivory, her eyes more almond than round. She looked exhausted, even her sleep did not seem restful, a faint line of worry creased her brow and there were shadows beneath her eyes. He stared as a tear slid down her cheek and she sniffed.

Confused he tried to look around without moving, attempted to get his bearings. Behind the sleeping girl, partially in shadows, he could make out another figure sleeping on a cot. He squinted his eyes and peered into the dim, there were two more cots across from him. He was in a hospital, so that explained the smell and the pain.

*Now exactly how did I get here? Think man, think. Sea air, sea air and a warm breeze on my face. A boat, no I was on a ship, a ship with Michael, not Michael, John. Why was I with John, I have not seen him since my brother died. We were there to help. Help who dammit, think.*

On a groan, it all came flooding back to him, the battle, the explosion, the pain. He clenched his eyes and gritted his teeth at the memory, then startled when he felt a hand on his cheek and the soft crooning he thought had been a dream. His eyes flew open and he found himself lost in the darkest brown eyes he had ever seen.

Then she smiled at him, "So at last I have the answer to at least one of my questions, perhaps now I shall have the rest." When he frowned at her, she smoothed his hair back from his face. "I have

wondered for days what color your eyes would be. They are the same aquamarine as the sea. Now, if you are up to it, my next pressing question is your name. What is it?"

"Sean," He croaked and she immediately pressed a drink to his lips. After a few swallows he tried again, "Sean McCulloch, and you might be?"

"Elyse San Diamo, I have been your nurse since you arrived. No, do not try to move," she reprimanded as he attempted to turn off his side. "You have a rather nasty burn on your back and you will not find it too pleasant should you roll onto it. It is healing just fine and I would prefer it continue to do so, so please stay where you are."

"What else," he paused as she gave him another sip of water. "Thank you. What else is wrong? I seem to hurt all over."

"As you should. You have scrapes, bruises and minor burns over most of you. The most serious is the burn on your left shoulder and the cut on your left leg. When a, I think they call it a mast," he nodded fractionally, "fell, it splintered and you were stabbed with a large piece. I am afraid it looks nasty and required a great deal of stitching, but the doctor says it will heal. You will have a wicked scar, but he does not think you will have a limp, or at least in time you will not have a limp. I imagine you will be favoring it until it heals properly. All in all, your wounds are healing well. It was the fever that had us so worried." He tried to shift again and winced. "None of that, as I said, you are best to stay as you are. If you need something you only need to ask."

Resigning himself to staying put, he asked, "How long have I been here?"

"Six days in my care, but from what I have gathered from your shipmates, you were injured fourteen days ago. Which brings me to another question, why is it none of those men could give me your name?"

"Am I in London?" She nodded. "Are you British?"

"Not that I can see how that matters, but yes I am British or I should clarify, my father was Spanish and my mother was British so technically I am half British. I have lived in London my entire life."

He assessed her for a moment, when he assured himself she spoke the truth he elaborated, "I was on special assignment, not part

of the logged crew. That is why a majority of the men did not know me. Can you tell me how the rest of the crew fared?"

"Remarkably well considering. We had five here in our ward, but from the reports the surgeons received there were only sixteen men injured from the Ajax, none fatally. That is if there were no others onboard like yourself."

"No, only me. Was there a John Pilfold on the list of injured?"

"Not in our ward, but if you give me a few moments I can see if I can find the surgeon and see if he has the initial report." Before he could protest she continued, "I made your doctor a promise I would find him as soon as you awoke. I should only be a bit. Try to rest while I am gone."

Rest? Apparently that is all he had been doing for over a fortnight, now that his mind was engaged he could hardly justify rest.

"Sean?" the light touch on his face startled him. He let his eyes focus. Elyse was crouched next to him and there was an older white-haired man standing behind her. "This is Doctor Stephenson. I told him you were awake and talking. You made a fibber out of me. Ah, but now you are with us again." She scooted out of the way so the doctor could examine him. He poked, he prodded, and by the time he was finished Sean was pale and his forehead beaded in sweat. Without flinching, Elyse wringed out a cloth and wiped his face then gave him a few more sips of water. "Now, take this, it will make you sleep."

"I have done nothing but sleep for weeks."

"And that is as it should be. I will not be putting up with any arguing. The more you rest, the quicker you will heal, and the quicker you will be able to get out of here."

And so the tone was laid for the next several days. Sean grumbled, Elyse bullied until she got her way, and slowly he regained his strength. A full week had passed before the doctor deemed him well enough to try to walk, a harrowing endeavor to say the least, but with Elyse's help, they managed. When she was not fussing over his injuries or berating his surly disposition, she was gleaning the answers to all her questions. Although he did not know of her brother, he promised he had the resources at his disposal and would find out.

Three days later, after convincing the doctors of his ability to

walk with only the aid of a cane, and his solemn vow he would spend the next several weeks recuperating, Sean was released from the hospital. Despite his protest at the impropriety of a single woman escorting a man to a bachelor's residence, Elyse did just that, and only when convinced of Hugh's capabilities, she left Sean in the butler's care, temporarily at least.

Once Hugh saw him settled he said, "I shall pen Master Christian a note telling him you are alive and on the mends. Miss San Diamo said she will be here on the morrow to check on you. I will bring you a tray at two, until then I expect you to remain abed." His dictate complete, the butler exited the room with a firm click of the door.

Although Sean chuckled at Hugh's abrasiveness, he had every intention to comply, for truthfully, the short trip from his hospital bed to this one had sapped the little energy he possessed. He fell asleep with a smile on his lips wondering how long he would tolerate Hugh and Elyse clucking over him.

Robert met up with Christian in the library shortly before the dinner gong. “You will be happy to know the immediate threat to Samantha has been, shall we say, eradicated.”

“Not before you gained the information you sought I trust?”

“I will wait until we are all together to discuss the details, but suffice it to say, we have details of our prime suspect.” Robert reached into his jacket pocket and handed Christian a note. “This came for you as we were leaving.”

Christian watched his brother leave the room before he broke the seal.

*Christian –*

*I promised Sean that if something were to happen to him, I would contact you. Sean sustained significant injuries during our encounter at Cadiz. He left my ship alive but in grave condition. I was called away on duty before I could gain any additional information as to his condition or whereabouts. My deepest apologies for my lack of knowledge.*

*Regards,*

*Captain John Pilford  
Her Majesty's Royal Navy*

Christian reread the missive then, with hands that shook, tucked it into his pocket and proceeded to the dining room. Without saying a word, he took his seat between Robert and Samantha. Samantha was engaged in an animated conversation with Liam and barely spared him a glance, Robert on the other hand was studying him openly, but upon a shake of Christian's head, he let the matter drop. He knew Christian would tell him when the time was appropriate.

Aaron rose from his seat at the head of the table, lifted his

glass and his voice boomed through the room, "Since the two of you were not here earlier, I will pardon your discussion on the grounds you did not know of my earlier dictate. All discussion of the situation at hand has been tabled until after lunch tomorrow. Tonight we are relishing the oddity that we are all gathered together and we have been allotted this time to enjoy each other's company. So here is to friends and family, there are no greater treasures on earth."

A chorus of 'Here, here' went around the room. Much as expected, Robert took his mother's condition in good form, harassed his brother some over his reaction and made reference to his wager with Christian as to who would be the baby's Godfather. They unearthed some fine French wine from the cellars, and Cook outdid herself with the veritable feast she prepared. The initial tension dissipated and the evening took on a festive tone, everyone determined to enjoy the respite.

After supper was completed, the group retired to the parlor, and upon Kathryn and Suzanne's insistence Samantha sat down at the pianoforte, "I will only agree if my brother accompanies."

Without any additional prodding, Liam stood by her side, "The usual?" he asked without needing to, as Samantha's fingers danced across the keys. The haunting notes of an Irish ballad wafted through the air, their tone melding in a harmony only achieved by kindred voices, his tenor to her alto. They mesmerized their audience with a tale of a sailor lost at sea and his young love forever waiting his return.

The final note hung in the air and was greeted by utter silence, but before the solemn mood was allowed to take hold, the duet segued into a rousing drinking song that bordered on inappropriate for mixed company. Not to anyone's surprise, Aaron scooped Suzanne into his arms and began twirling her around the room. Graydon and Kathryn joined them at a more sedate pace. Before long everyone was laughing and clapping to the beat, everyone that is except Christian who remained a staid observer.

After crying fatigue, Samantha relinquished her seat to Suzanne who kept the group entertained with some Scottish ditties. Samantha made her way to Christian, "Entertainment not to your liking?"

"Not at all. You and your brother are quite good." He offered her a weak smile.



“Well then, cut line. Why are you sulking?”

He scowled, “Men do not sulk.” He sighed, “Alright, perhaps I am sulking. My apologies, but I have just cause.” He reached into his pocket, withdrew the note and handed it to her.

After reading it she said, “Why are you still here? You should be on your way to London.”

“How can I until matters are resolved here?” He argued.

“Tell me, who is it exactly you do not trust, your brothers, your father, oh, I know it must be your uncle?”

“Of course I trust them, it is not...”

“Not what? They are more than capable of handling the situation.” She spun away from him before he could stop her, headed directly to his uncle and thrust the note into his hand. “Please inform your lame-brained nephew you have things under control and he should leave first thing!”

Christian had stalked up behind her and tried to retrieve the note before his uncle could read it, but failed. “This is none of your affair.” He growled at her. The altercation immediately brought Robert and Graydon to Christian’s side.

“No, but it is mine,” Aaron reproached, “and I happen to agree. You are the closest thing Sean has to family, and should see to his wellbeing. You will leave at first light and take Murphy with you. We will follow after we have heard Robert’s report in the morning and had a strategy session. We will be no more than a few days behind you. I expect a full report as soon as you know something.”

“It goes against my grain not to see a mission to fruition.” He complained.

“Son, do you honestly think you can devote one hundred percent of your focus here? Aaron is right, you and Sean are as close as brothers. Your place is with him now, you are all he has. As for the mission, you are not abandoning it, merely limiting your involvement for a few days. We will apprise you of all developments when we meet in London. Go pack your things so you can get an early start.”

None too pleased with the dictate, Christian turned and stalked out of the room. Robert followed him. When they were out of earshot, he laid a hand on Christian’s shoulder, “I shall guard her as

you would, no harm will befall her.”

“I appreciate that, but it does not make this any easier.” He raked his hands through his hair in frustration, “I am truly torn.”

“Then take my advice, go, assure yourself of Sean’s wellbeing, then and only then will your full attention be devoted to Samantha. On that point, what are your intentions toward Samantha?”

“If I only knew. I have developed a definite affection for her. She is like no other woman I know, but that in itself is causing most of my confusion. She, in no uncertain terms, is treating this as a finite dalliance. On more than one occasion she has told me our time together will be short. Normally this type of arrangement would be ideal, but...”

“But for the first time in your life, you are thinking beyond tomorrow?”

“I ... I do not know. I always knew I would have to marry, but I had imagined it not being for another ten years at least, and then I had imagined more of a marriage of convenience for, as you know, in our profession, it would not be fair of me to expect more when I would be an absentee husband at best. I would choose a young lady of acceptable lineage, beget an heir then, for the most part, go our separate ways.”

“You say this after being witness to your uncle’s marriage?”

“Surely you must know, theirs is a unique union. Finding a true partner is hardly the norm.”

“Do you not think our parents have found the same type of union? I do, but then again I am far less cynical than you brother. I also believe there is a certain someone out there for me.”

“I am not a cynic, I am a realist. You, on the other hand, appear to be a romantic.”

“Be that as it may, it is Samantha we are discussing, not me. Has it occurred to you she speaks of your limited time together because that is what she thinks you expect, and it is easier for her to resolve herself to you leaving than pinning her hopes on something more? Just food for thought, but you will do as you will.” With the parting shot he added as he shook Christian’s hand, “God’s speed, and please send word when you find Sean, obviously I am concerned as well.”

Christian assured Robert he would, then turned and climbed the stairs to his room. Sometime later, after he had finished packing and the house had gone quiet, he heard a light tap on his door. Instinctively he knew who it was and debated opening the door. He was still angry at her high-handedness and did not want their parting to be on a sour note. When the second, slightly louder knock came, he sighed and resigned himself to the inevitable.

“May I come in?”

“If you must,” he grumbled but opened the door wider for her to enter.

“Now do not be going all surly on me. You know you would not be able to stand it if you did not assure yourself Sean was alright. I merely hastened your decision.”

“That is not the point.” He barked, “It was not for you to decide. I have other sources I could have enlisted who could have looked into his whereabouts.”

“Is that what Sean would have done if the situation was reversed?”

He scowled at her. He knew she was right, and he knew he was acting childish but for some reason he could not seem to help himself. He turned his back on her and fussed with his bag pretending to finish his packing. He straightened and closed his eyes when he felt her arms slip around his waist and hug him. “You are upset and you are worried, both perfectly reasonable emotions, emotions you are not used to, and you are acting like a wounded animal, again understandable.”

He released Samantha’s arms from around his waist and turned toward her, “Stop, just stop being so damned agreeable.” He raked his hands through his hair. “I will admit I am worried and I feel completely inept being this far from London and not knowing where or how Sean is faring, but that does not excuse the way I treated you. I behaved atrociously toward you and that was inexcusable.” He turned from her again and sat in one of the two chairs by the hearth.

She followed, “I said understandable, I do not recall mentioning excusable.”

He looked up at her, saw the smile playing about her lips and reluctantly let out a small chuckle. “You. Samantha, are an enigma.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her onto his lap.

She swatted his shoulder as she settled herself more comfortably, "So you think you are forgiven do you? You are just lucky I do not wish to squabble on our last night together."

Christian stiffened at her words but tried to make his light, "Lucky indeed. And what exactly did you wish for on our last night?"

"I am sure our imagination will take us somewhere far more pleasant than an argument would, would you not say?"

"Most definitely," he mumbled as his lips covered hers. If she was determined to make this their last night together, he would do everything in his power to make it a night she would not forget, and he set himself to doing just that. He spent the next several hour showing her just how wonderful and unusual their union was, he brought her to heights never experienced, and when they finally lay in each other's arms exhausted and sated, he heard her whisper, "Beidh mo chroí istigh ionat go deo" before she fell asleep.

He awoke at dawn alone, gathered his belongings, met Murphy in the forecourt and set off for London, not noticing the figure watching him from the window, tears sliding silently down her cheeks.

When Robert had everyone's attention, he started. "About a year ago I was investigating the disappearance of two French nationals, and even though we could not prove it at the time, a Lord Reilly Winston became a person of interest. Although at first glance his business dealings appeared above board, when we delved further into his financials, there were several unsubstantiated windfalls in his accounts, a fact only recently uncovered.

"The men we apprehended in Kilkenny were known henchmen for Sir Winston and luckily one knew enough of his inner workings to prove beneficial. As I mentioned, a report arrived just as I was leaving to substantiate my suppositions. It does seem Titus was a reluctant co-conspirator in this whole matter as well. Although we do not have all the information as of yet, it seems several months ago Titus' younger brother also went missing. My theory is he is being held captive to insure Titus' cooperation."

Graydon glanced at Samantha, "That at least explains your reaction to the boy. So Robert, what do you think this Winston chap has brewing?"

"We have had reports of meetings between Winston and several yet to be identified foreign gentlemen. My thoughts are he is selling information to them as to the whereabouts of the people on your list. There are a few prominent French who obviously have been found and subsequently eradicated. I do not think it a coincidence."

Monsieur de la Rues handed Robert the list they had compiled the day before and pointed to the list from the back of the journal, "Are these the people who have gone missing or as you said eradicated?"

Robert studied the names, "I can confirm six of them, but with a little time I can verify the remaining names."

"I do not think you will need to do that," Aaron sighed. "Six is proof enough for me." Everyone stayed silent as he gathered his thoughts. "He has been lucky to uncover the ones he has, and if he

gets his hands on the list, the remaining peoples' fates are sealed. Andrews it looks like your idea may just come to pass. We need to devise a plan where one particular name will be too profitable for Winston not to see to it personally instead of sending one of his underlings to do his bidding. Obviously the target will be one of our own and I think I know just who it will be."

"Without question," Jean Pierre chimed in. "I would be the, how should I say, the ripe plum he could not resist picking."

"No, I could not ask you to do such a thing. It should be one of my men."

"You did not ask Aaron, I offered. Your choice for whom he might go after would be mere speculation. We know he would come after me if the chance presented itself. Of course, I would request your men be positioned as part of my staff for security. I have no death wish after all."

Aaron rolled the idea around in his mind, "I do not like it, but it may be our best alternative, and most assuredly you will have ample protection. I suppose you have an idea as to an appropriate trap Jean Pierre?"

He thought for a few moments before he said, "I think it should be simple. I return to your London home, as I have been known to stay in the past and go about my business as if Robert's apprehension of the ruffians was the end to the threat. It is only logical I would still possess my version of the list, only this time my list will be the fraudulent copy. The only downside would be they also know you have a copy and if we are under the same roof..."

"If your concerns are about my home being subject to the same fate as Samantha's, then stop." Suzanne insisted. "There is nothing in the townhome that is irreplaceable. Any inconvenience we sustain will be well worth it if Lord Winston is stopped."

"Unfortunately the ideal would be not to stop Winston directly, but have him relay the misinformation to his French contacts. There is more chance in bringing down the entire operation if we lay traps for each of them to fall into. If we simply eradicate their one source of information, it will set them back some time, but eventually they will replace Winston with another, and we will be right back where we started."

"To make such an elaborate plot brother, we will need access

to the personnel files. It is hardly something you would be able to undertake from here. That being said, we would need to return without alerting anyone, for it will take a considerable amount of time to compile and rewrite a plausible list.”

William perked up, “If I were to return now, it would not raise any eyebrows. If you give me a head start, I should be able to compile a list of operatives who could take over for the émigrés, allowing you to slip in and finalize it in a relatively short period. I think I could buy us the time we need.”

“Do you think you could encode a copy of the list so no one could understand it but you? We cannot take a chance in sending you with an actual copy.”

William nodded to his superior then glanced at his brother and smiled, “I should clarify, there is one other person who would be able to decipher.”

Slowly recognition dawned on Robert’s face, “The old code, perfect. Sir Aaron if I may, I would like to assist William. With us working together you are all but assured the time you need, and the two of us arriving together would not raise suspicion, for more times than not, it is the case.”

“What old code?” Graydon asked, and before either Robert or William could answer their mother spoke, “When the boys were young, they developed a language all their own that no one besides themselves could ever understand, much to Andrews’ and my frustration. As far as I was concerned it was nonsensical babble, but to the two of them it made perfect sense. They kept at it through school and were even disciplined because of it a few times. After all these years do you still remember?” Her sons exchanged a look, then both smiled in response. “Well I would have never thought your ramblings would prove beneficial. Did you Andrews?”

The old butler laughed, “Ne’er once Miss, ne’er once.”

“That said, my decision is obvious, but Robert, not before you give us all the information you have on this Winston chap and all his known associates. Forewarned is forearmed and all that.”

Robert spent the good part of the next hour relaying the history of Lord Reilly Winston. He laid a thick folder on the table when he began and paged through it while he spoke. “He is a minor Earl who came by his title after his father and three older brothers

passed away. Although titled, he was of relatively meager means until five years ago when there was an influx of money into his coffers.

“On the surface, his income appeared to be derived from investment decisions he made and was able to cash in on, however, upon closer scrutiny, the businesses he and those he coerced had invested in, were purely fabricated. Swindles aside, there are several large deposits we cannot tie into any business dealings. If the timing of those deposits coincide with the observed meetings with the unknown foreign gentlemen, we would have a strong case against him.”

“It sounds as though the proof you have of the cons alone would be enough to guarantee a stay in Newgate.” Graydon remarked.

“True but, as Sir Aaron said, justice would be served far better if the entire operation were to crumble. As much as I would like to see Winston behind bars, we need to remember he is merely a fly in a much larger web.”

“A web we now need to have fold upon itself. Well done Robert. You have given us more than enough to outline a plan. Go help your brother and check in one last time before you leave.” Aaron dismissed him and turned to Samantha, “You have been awfully quiet this morning. Have you anything to add?”

She shook her head, “Actually I was thinking quite the opposite. I have obviously outstayed my usefulness. Perhaps it would be best if I returned home and let you sort out the remaining details.”

“I am afraid I would not advise it my dear. Although Robert successfully disbanded the thugs who were putting you in jeopardy, they were but pawns, a pence a dozen. You are not out of danger until the treat from Winston has been eliminated. You will have to suffer our company for a while longer my dear. Liam, I would suggest you too travel with us to London. Robert you did assign some of our men to both Prichard residences did you not?”

“I left Donovan there and the others should be joining him shortly if they have not already arrived.”

“Excellent. Go now and assist William with the transposition, and when you have finished, check in one last time before you depart. In the meantime, we will work out the preliminary details for our course of action.”



As Robert exited Suzanne spoke, "Robert has given us a lot to ponder. My suggestion would be we take a little time to digest the information then come back to the table with some ideas. I know the best way to clear my mind is a good hard ride. Samantha, would you care to join me? I had my eye on that chestnut that arrived with your brother and would absolutely love a chance to try the mount."

"That would be Kilburne and she is a beauty." Samantha sighed. "I did promise Caramel a run today, so if it is alright with you Liam, we will exercise your ladies." Receiving her brother's nod she rose from her chair and turned to Suzanne, "If you will grant me a few minutes to change, I shall meet you at the stables."

Suzanne rose as well, "Perfect, I will see you there." Before she left, she brushed a kiss on her husband's cheek and he whispered, "What are you about woman?"

In a whisper she answered, "Is it not obvious the girl is troubled. Perhaps a good ride will lower her defenses. It tears at my heart to see her in such pain." Aaron patted her hand and smiled but did not reply.

When she had left Liam asked, "I trust by your lack of hesitation at letting your wife ride a horse she does not know, you have complete confidence in her horsemanship abilities?"

"As much confidence as you seem to have in Samantha's. I saw the horse she is to ride and it came across as a spirited beast."

"Caramel is frisky, but around Samantha she is as placid as a newborn foal. Kilburne will be equally as gentle with Suzanne. I may just take a ride as well but I will wait until the ladies leave and head in the opposite direction." When Aaron frowned at him, he explained. "I know my sister well and she is currently out of sorts. Normally I would be her confidant, but I sense this time she needs a woman's touch."

"Apparently you and my wife are of the same mind, she said as much before she left."

Liam stood and asked the remaining members of the room, "Would anyone care to join me?"

"If you do not mind the company of an old man, I would." Jean Pierre offered. "It has been a good long time since I have ridden just for the sheer pleasure of the ride."

“I would be honored Sir. I will meet you at the stables.” When the two men were off, Andrews also took his leave stating household matter needed his attention, leaving Kathryn, Graydon and Aaron at the table. “Graydon,” Aaron began, “I do not want an argument, but after we have formulated a plan and head to London, I feel you should accompany your wife home.”

“I will not argue for I was thinking the same, although I expect a full recount of the events.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Hugh!” Christian bellowed as he entered his townhome, tossed his coat on the newel post, peeled off his riding gloves and threw them on the sideboard. Mounting the stairs two at a time he bellowed again, “Dang it you old coot, where the blazes are you! Hugh!”

He came up short when, at the top of the stairs, he was met by a brunette vixen who hissed at him, “Will you kindly lower your voice.” She stood two steps above him but her brown-black eyes met his level, eyes he was sure would have reduced a lesser man to sunders for they were currently shooting pure fire at him. In a furious whisper she reproached, “Who do you think you are coming in here ranting like a lunatic?”

“The owner of this house that is who. The question is who the hell are you?”

Not cowering and inch she still glared at him, “Elyse” she stated as if it explained everything. “Hugh is not here, he has gone to run errands.”

“Well, Elyse, that is all well and good, but it still does not explain who you are and what you are doing in my house.”

At that she startled, “Oh, oh that must mean you did not get the missive Hugh sent. But it has been well over a week, surely your man made it to Ireland in that amount of time.”

“No, I did not receive a missive and I have come from Derbyshire, not Ireland.”

Satisfied she said, “Well that explains it then, does it not?”

She started to turn and walk away but stopped at Christian’s words. “That may explain things for you, but I am still clueless. What missive, what did it say, and who the hell are you!”

“No sense getting testy and lower your damned voice!” Exasperated he glared at her. “The missive came from Hugh. It was to

inform you that Sean is recuperating here, and as I said, I am Elyse. I have been caring for Sean since his accident, first at the hospital then here. Satisfied?"

He blinked at her then his expression softened, "Sean is here?"

"Yes, but he is sleeping, and I would prefer if he stayed that way. If you insist on discussing this further, I will meet you in the study after I make sure the commotion you just caused did not waken him." She turned her back on him and marched toward the guest room where Sean was sleeping.

He stared until she disappeared into the room then turned and headed back downstairs. Murphy was still waiting in the front foyer. He witnessed the exchange but could only make out parts of the hushed conversation, "What was all that about?"

"That little hellion was Elyse. She apparently has taken charge of Sean's care, a position she takes very seriously I might add."

Murphy chuckled, "Put you in your place did she?" He only laughed harder when Christian glowered at him.

"She remanded me to the study so I would not disturb him. I would invite you to stay, but one look at you might send her scurrying."

"If she had the fortitude to stare you down, I highly doubt she would even flinch at me, but I will busy myself elsewhere and you can tell me later. At least take comfort Sean is here and if not exactly unscathed, he is very much alive."

"A blessing for sure. Now off with you, she should be down any moment."

Christian had just finished pouring himself a drink when Elyse entered the room. He took a moment to study her. She was a pint-sized woman, the top of her head would not even reach his shoulder. She was fashionably dressed in a green day gown, her dark hair pulled into a knot at the top of her head. Her exotic dark eyes were fringed with thick, equally dark, lashes and a luscious full mouth punctuated her otherwise delicate features. He accorded her a benign smile as a peace offering. Taking the olive branch she began, "I derive from you pronouncement you are Christian?"

"Christian Aaron Bradford," he bowed, "for my sins."

“Elyse San Diamo,” she gave a quick bob. “Sean has told me much about you, he refers to you as his brother and for that reason alone I am willing to excuse your behavior earlier, especially since you never received the note telling you he was alright.”

“That is big of you,” he drawled. “but I too am willing to wipe the slate clean so to speak. Please take a seat and you can fill me in on his condition. Did I wake him?”

She did as he suggested and answered, “No, he should remain asleep for a while longer. He still requires two doses of laudanum a day, a small one in the afternoon and another at night.”

“He is in a great deal of pain?”

“Not nearly as much as before, but yes.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“He has been a little vague with the details, but I was able to piece together the story from what he said as well as from some of the other patients we had in the ward. He was onboard the Ajax when it was in the battle at Trafalgar. He was on deck assisting when the main mast was hit and fell. He was brought down by it and is quite lucky he was not killed. When the mast splintered, a large piece impaled his leg and he suffered burns to his left side. The doctors say he will be scarred, but in time should make a full recovery. The Ajax fared well, they did not lose any men, the same cannot be said for the remaining ships in the fleet.”

“The loss of life is truly a sin, but unfortunately an inevitability of war. I would like to thank you for taking care of him. Please be assured you will be well compensated for your time.”

Fire returned to her eyes, she rose, put her hands on her hips and snarled at him, “I do not want, nor need your money. If you think that is the reason I helped him, our time here is through.”

He raised his hands in surrender, “I did not mean to offend you. I assumed someone had assigned you to his care. Please, I meant no malice.” She eyed him, then let out an unladylike snort, and retook her seat. “San Diamo, that name sounds familiar. Why do I know it?”

“My father and one of his colleagues started the hospital near the waterfront some forty years ago. Perhaps through your involvement in the military, he treated countless soldiers in his day.”

Christian thought for a minute and agreed, "That is very likely. Is that how you became involved, through your father?"

She nodded, "and my mother as well. They worked side-by-side until they passed away. I was practically raised in the hospital, it is like a second home. My brother followed in my father's footsteps, I in my mother's."

"Your brother is a surgeon at the hospital?"

"Yes a surgeon, but not at the hospital. He answered the call of the military and is practicing his trade within."

Christian furrowed his brow, "Dominick, no Damian San Diamo?"

Elyse's eyes flew wide and hope ignited, "You know my brother? Do you know where he is? Please tell me, I have not heard from him in over a year and I have been so worried."

"I met him once several months back. I cannot tell you where he is or what he is doing, but if you would like I can get notice to him on your behalf. Just realize correspondences will be few and far between. They would put him in too much jeopardy."

Elyse let his words sink in. She was elated to know her brother was alive, yet her trepidation doubled as to what her brother may now be involved. Reading her thoughts, Christian tried to comfort her, "Your brother is doing a great service to the Crown. If he remains where he is and remains undetected, he is in relatively little danger. If by chance he is found out, he has been amply trained to eradicate himself from the situation."

"Then I will not take a chance in sending a letter. I will have to be satisfied with the information you have given me. If the situation were to change, would you be able to get word to me?"

"If I am privy to the information, I will do my best."

"Thank you." She smiled and rose from her seat again. "If you would like, we can check on Sean and see if he is awake."

Christian followed her out of the room and up the stairs. Neither spoke. Elyse quietly opened the door a crack and peered in, then opened the door wide when she was met with aqua blue eyes. "You have a visitor if you are feeling up to it."

“Who?” he asked, then his face broke into a wide grin as he saw who had followed Elyse into the room.

“Some things never change, a wastrel and a slug-a-bed if I ever knew one. And not even as much sense God gave a gnat, you would think it obvious if something was falling at you, you would get out of the way.” Christian joked.

“Just goes to show the trouble I get in when you do not have my back.”

“I see your knack for blarney was unaffected, for you know as well as I, you are the one who has saved my sorry hide on more than one occasion.”

“I believe if we took a tally, the score would come up quite even.”

“All jest aside,” Christian sobered as he drew a chair next to the bed and straddled it, “how are you faring?”

“I have been better.” Sean conceded, “but then again I have been worse. Just a few weeks ago, I might add.”

“So you are mending well?”

“I still need a cane to get around and I tire easily, but each day the pain is subsiding and I am getting stronger. Thanks wholly to the little lady standing behind you.”

Elyse pinked slightly then rebuffed him, “Full of the blarney if you ask me. It is his obstinacy and determination that have gotten him thus far, not my ministrations. I am merely here to remind him to take care.”

“More like dictate. Do not let her slight size fool you my friend, she is far worse than any commander we have ever had.”

Christian chuckled, “I have already seen her in action dear boy and I would have to agree.”

“Humph! I do not need to listen to this abuse, so I will leave you two.” Elyse turned to Christian and gave him a stern look, “Do not be tiring him out or you will see precisely how fierce I can be.”

Both men laughed as she left the room. Christian shook his head, “Found yourself a spitfire there. Leave it to you, even

incapacitated, you find the prettiest girls.”

Sean smiled, “She is a beauty, is she not? But then again the blonde I saw you with last was not exactly hard on the eyes, bruises aside of course.”

“Bruises?” Christian was bewildered for a moment. “Oh, yes, yes, you saw Samantha the day after her attack. I had forgotten.” He smiled, “She is lovely but exasperating. Be damned if I can figure that one out.”

Sean laughed again, “Do stop making me laugh, it is quite painful. I never thought I would see the day Christian Aaron Bradford, perplexed by a woman. Do tell, I cannot wait to hear all.”

Christian did, he went over point by point what had transpired over the past several weeks, glancing over the more intimate details, but relaying the entire scenario to Sean. “So you see, she seemed quite willing to be rid of me.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“What else am I supposed to believe? She told me plainly enough.”

“Seems to me she told you more plainly with her actions, but you are too much of a dolt to understand.” Sean gave his friend an exasperated look. “What did she say to you the night before you left?”

“That my place was with you and we should not part on bad terms.” He thought a moment then added, “She did say something in Gaelic, but ...”

“Well what did it sound like?” Sean practically growled in frustration.

Christian frowned at his friend as he tried to remember, “Beed muh hree something or other deo, or something like that.”

Sean sat up and smiled, “Beidh mo chroí istigh ionat go deo?”

“Possibly, maybe, I am not sure, I think so. Why what does it mean?”

Sean debated telling him, weighing the possibility of him figuring it out for himself against the probability of him giving up all



hope. He studied his friend for a moment, Christian appeared frustrated and more than a little heart broken. He relented, "My heart is forever with you, my beloved."

Christian startled at the words, his heart flipped in his chest then settled, "Are you telling me true? Is that what she really said?" Sean nodded. "Be damned, Robert was right."

"Pardon me?"

"Robert, he said Samantha was saying what she was because that is what she thought I wanted to hear. I mean, she said. Argh, you know what I mean."

Sean could not help himself, he laughed again, "So now you know. The question is what are you going to do about it?"

"Do?"

"Yes you fool, do. My only request is you wait a few weeks until I can stand for more than a few minutes before you require me to stand up for you."

Christian just stared in total befuddlement. Stand up for him? Married? Him? His head reeled. Is that what he wanted? Would she have him? He had broached the subject before and she dismissed him.

Sean laughed harder, then winced again in pain. "Ask yourself this my friend, can you picture your life without Samantha? Can you picture her marrying someone else, bearing someone else's children?"

The notion gave him pause and a resounding 'NO' echoed through his head. He let out a breath as he shook his head.

"Then your choice is obvious."

"If that is so, the next question is how do I convince Samantha?"

"I cannot tell you, but I know you will find the way, you always accomplish your goals once you set them."

Christian gave Sean a pained look, "But what if she refuses me?"

"But what if she does not? If you do not take a chance, you will never know."

Christian nodded and stood when he saw Sean stifle a yawn, “I best let you rest before your little tyrant comes back and coshes me over the head. I shall see you at dinner.”

As he left the room he absently rubbed his hand across his stomach trying to ease the knot that had formed. Sean was right, if he set his mind to it, he would be able to convince Samantha they were meant to be together. He would simply have to woo her. How one goes about wooing a woman he has already been intimate with he was not sure, but he thought it was his best chance.

Suzanne and Samantha were winded as they brought their mounts to a halt at the top of the glen at the far end of the Farrell estate. Suzanne beamed, "There is nothing I enjoy more than a good hard run." She exclaimed breathlessly. "Your brothers have raised a splendid horse. How many do they have?"

Samantha smiled, feeling much more herself after the ride, "At present eighteen mares and four studs. If all fares well they will have six new foals come spring."

"Well if the rest are as fine as these two, I may have to convince my husband to look over the stock. Mine is a fine lady, but she is getting on in years. It is time I let her out to pasture."

"Just send word. We would be honored to have you come for a visit and look over the farm. Knowing Séamas, he will have you ride each one before he will let you choose."

"Sounds like I will be making an extended visit." Suzanne laughed and Samantha joined her. "It is good to see some joy in you again."

"Am I that transparent?"

"Probably not to most, but I could tell you were hurting. Have you told Christian how you feel." Samantha bit her lip and nodded. "And that dolt of a nephew I have left you anyway?"

Samantha shook her head, "I doubt he understood what I said."

Suzanne raised her hand stopping Samantha, "Do not make excuses for him, he is a very astute man. If you told him, he understood."

Samantha continued to shake her head. "I can pretty much guarantee he did not understand, that is unless he knows Gaelic. "

"You little minx, why did you not tell him?"

“How can I? His work is everything to him. I will not ask him to change that, it is far too important to him and to your country. I do not want him from some misguided sense of duty.”

Suzanne chuckled and shook her head, “Oh to be that young again. Can I ask you a few things?” When Samantha nodded she went on, “Do you think my marrying Aaron jeopardized his career in any way?” Samantha shook her head. “Would you not support Christian in the same way I support my husband?” Samantha nodded. “It is a rare thing to find a partner you understand, who understands you and is willing to enter a relationship as equals. I have seen the way my nephew looks at you child, and I can assure you a sense of duty does not factor into any equation as far as he is concerned.”

“I am not sure...” Samantha began before Suzanne interrupted.

“He looks at you with fire and passion in his eyes. He looks at you with respect and understanding, and he looks at you with love, only you are so focused on protecting him you do not see it for yourself.”

Tears welled in Samantha’s eyes, “Well then more the fool am I, for I have sent him away.”

Suzanne nudged her mount closer to Samantha so she could take the girl’s hand. “Well then, you will just have to get him back now won’t you? Lucky for you, this time I will be there to help.” Suzanne gave her a Machiavellian smile. “Come, let us see what the men folk are doing.”

The women entered the study just as Robert and William were finishing their presentation to Aaron and Graydon. They had made short work of the conversion, and from the look on Aaron’s face he was pleased with the results. “I cannot make hide nor hair of this gibberish and I know what the list says. Fine work men, fine work.” He praised. “So off with you. Arrange a clear path for me, I will meet you at midnight at Headquarters in two days’ time.”

When Robert and William departed, the remaining group went straight to work on devising a plan to entrap Lord Winston and hopefully the Frenchmen funding him. They worked straight through to the wee hours before all were satisfied with the plan. Aaron cleared his throat, “All that is left is to assign the appropriate operatives to take the identities of the key players, and we will be able to start things in motion. If we can leave by noon tomorrow,” he glanced at

the grandfather clock on the wall as it chimed the half hour, “make that noon today, we should reach London by nine or ten tomorrow night. Plenty of time for me to get to my office by midnight. I suggest we get some sleep, the next several days may prove exhausting at best.”

At precisely noon, their carriages pulled out of the drive, Graydon, Kathryn and Andrews in one headed to Wales, upon Suzanne’s insistence, she and Samantha in another and Aaron, Jean Pierre and Liam in the third headed to London. As predicted, the party reached London the following evening, all tired yet equally energized at the probability of bringing their nightmare to a final close.

The Bradford townhome was a flurry of activity, for there had not been enough time to warn the staff of their owner’s arrival let alone that of three house guests. It was well after midnight before everyone was settled into their rooms, everyone that is except Aaron who crept into his office under cloak of darkness like a common thief. Even the guards were unaware of his arrival. A lone lantern was lit low in his office as he entered silently. “Right on time as usual.” Robert’s hushed voice sliced the darkened room.

“Did anyone see you come in here?” Aaron questioned the two.

“No, we remained until after everyone departed for the evening, left via the front gate so we could bid good evening to the guards, then doubled back. We only lit the lamp a few moments ago.”

“Excellent. So what do you have for me?”

William produced dozens of files as Robert moved the lamp to a table at the far corner of the room, away from the windows. With the drapes drawn and with the office located on the third floor, there was virtually no chance of detection, but no one was willing to take a chance. Aaron studied each operatives files carefully, dismissed those whose current assignment was too far away to have them in London within a few days. If their plan was to work, they needed to act quickly, the more time they took to execute, the more suspicion they would raise. He matched operatives against émigrés not only to the point of physical resemblance, but as to knowledge of the émigrés’ trade.

Only a few were force-fed, but all in all, Aaron was pleased with the results. From his calculations, it would take no more than five days to make the exchanges, and although the customers would

surely recognize their merchants were not the same they had been dealing with for years, they would accept the operative as a relation helping with the business while the owner was away. The trick will lie with the operatives being able to distinguish between the true customers and the hired assassins. Aaron had enough confidence in his peoples' abilities that he was not overly concerned.

William and Robert worked through the night writing notes to the chosen operatives, summoning them to a meeting at the abandoned barn, ten kilometers from the city limits, off London Road, at midnight two days hence; while Aaron penned letters to each émigré detailing instructions to be ready to evacuate for a few days while he eradicated the latest threat to them. He affixed each letter with his personal seal and would have them hand delivered by his household staff in the morning. A courier may draw attention, but a servant out doing his daily marketing would not. Before the first fingers of dawn broke the sky, the men completed their task and slipped into the night, no one the wiser of their clandestine meeting.

Aaron should have known sneaking into his own house would not have been as easy as sneaking into his guarded office. He had not even closed the bedroom door before he heard Suzanne ask, "All went well?"

"Lord woman, do you ever sleep?" He sighed knowing he would not get any sleep himself until he told her all. "Yes, all went well. I will have Jenkins and the others deliver the letters tomorrow, and if you would my dear, I have a special one for you to deliver as well. A mere servant simply would not do in this case."

"Maria Theresa?"

"Precisely," He confirmed. "I know it will be a hardship, but do you think you and Samantha could suffer getting a few new gowns?"

Suzanne let out a heavy dramatic sigh, "If we must my dear. The sacrifices I make for the good of England." She squealed as her husband flopped on the bed and gathered her close and tickled her.

"Wench" he teased and she swatted at him. She settled down with her head on his shoulder and asked, "So what happens next?"

"I am meeting my people the night after tomorrow and giving them their assignments."

She blew air through her lips, “So you need to sit idle a day and a half while they assemble? Remind me to find somewhere else to be than around you. Your caged tiger act is not something I relish.”

“Is that so?”

Suzanne squealed again when she found herself flat on her back being thoroughly kissed by her husband. When he let her come up for air, she giggled, “Then again, perhaps I can figure out a way to keep you distracted while you wait.”

The quaint shoppe stood on the corner of Bond and Chalmers Streets, in the heart of the most sought after couturiers to haute *ton*. The tinkling of a bell announced Suzanne and Samantha's arrival and in moments they were greeted by the Modiste herself. "Welcome ladies, I am Madame Charlotte, how may I be of assistance to you this morning?"

"Good morning to you Madame, I am Lady Suzanne Bradford and this is Miss Samantha Prichard and we are in need of several gowns." Suzanne smiled brightly at the lovely older woman, assessing her reaction to their names. If she had any recollection, she did not let on, so Suzanne sweetened the pot a little, "One of my husband's dear friends, Monsieur Jean Pierre de la Rues has come to visit so I am throwing a ball in his honor and I find myself without a thing to wear." Suzanne smiled brilliantly, her ploy hit home. Although Madame Charlotte's expression did not alter, she could not prevent her face from paling. "Are we your only patrons at the moment? I would prefer your undivided attention for I would like our gowns to be absolutely perfect for the ball."

Her face paled even more and she swallowed hard before she replied. "As a matter of fact you are, I am unencumbered until later this afternoon. If you would give me a moment to lock the door?" She cinched the lock with shaking fingers then turned wide-eyed to her guests.

"Forgive me, Maria Theresa, I did not mean to frighten you but I needed to assure we were alone, and in truth, we do need gowns for the very reason I gave you. I have a letter for you from my husband. There has been a threat and we need to ensure your safety."

Maria let out the breath she had been holding but her hand still shook as she took the proffered letter from Suzanne. She read the note then looked to the women before her, "When should I expect this," she glanced at the note, "decoy your husband speaks of?"

"If all goes well, in two days' time." Suzanne confirmed.



“Well then, that does not leave me much time to create you something fabulous now does it?” The women stood in silence for a second, then they all laughed.

Samantha spoke for the first time since she had entered the shoppe, “You are truly remarkable Madame. I know I would not be able to handle such shocking news with such aplomb.”

Maria Theresa simply waved the compliment aside, “When one has chosen a path such as I have, one must be ready at all times to take unexpected detours. I have faith that this, like other occurrences before, will work itself out in time.”

“You have somewhere safe you can go?” Samantha asked.

“Yes, a dear friend in the country. I have been meaning to pay her a visit since her husband passed in the spring. Now, it would seem, would be the perfect time for the trip.” She turned to Suzanne and shyly asked, “So what you say is true? Jean Pierre is here? In London?”

The woman spent the next hours chatting like old friends as they chose the materials for their gowns. By the end of their fitting, they had convinced Maria to cry off from her afternoon appointment and accompany them back to the townhome.

“If I know the men well, and after all this time I surely do, they will be in the study.” Suzanne said as she led the way up the stair and down the hall. As suspected, Aaron and Jean Pierre were seated before the hearth and they rose as Suzanne entered the room. She watched Jean Pierre as the view of her guest became unobstructed. His eyes rounded then welled. He ignored the room’s other occupants and he went straight to Maria, gathered her hands in his and kissed them as he bent to one knee. Maria Theresa knelt in front of him, tears fell down her cheeks unchecked. Her voice broke as she said, “I never thought I would see you again.”

Jean Pierre brought her hands to his lips and kissed her again, drawing them both to stand. “The stories I heard. You do not know how I wished I could go to you, to save you. But how?”

She shook her head, “It was not I, it was Angelique. I have been here since they took Papa.”

“Angelique took your place? I cannot believe Madame de Polignac would allow her only child to do such a thing.”

“She did not know, she died the same night they killed my father. It was at Angelique’s insistence. I have felt guilty ever since but could not do anything, for if our scheme were revealed it would surely mean both of our lives.”

“From what I now hear, she is married to that simpering twit of a cousin of yours.”

“He is not all that bad,” she admonished. “In fact I would say it is a good match for both of them.”

She smiled and he drank in the sight of her. He found it hard to believe she was actually there with him, well and safe. He could hold back no longer and did not care who witnessed. He gathered her into his arms, “I never dreamt this day would come.”

“Oh Jean Pierre, it finally has and now I am merely Madame Charlotte, a Modiste from Bond Street. No one will ever keep us apart again. For the first time in far too long, God has smiled upon us.”

Aaron cleared his throat, in an attempt to be as unobtrusive as possible, “In light of your reunion Jean Pierre, perhaps you may want to rethink your current mission?”

Jean Pierre withdrew from Maria but only far enough to face Aaron, “No my friend, for now I have even more reason to see this to fruition. If I have the chance to free Maria and the others from living in fear, I must take it.” He turned to Maria. “It is the only way we will be able to be truly happy.”

Maria was unable to mask the terror in her eyes. She had just reclaimed the love of her life and she was in jeopardy of losing him all over again, but she knew he was right. They could not spend the rest of their lives looking over their shoulders.

“Then we must see to the Princess’ wellbeing. She can stay here until this matter has been resolved.”

Maria took a breath and shook her head, “No Sir Bradford, I am not the Princess. I gave that title up long ago, and I cannot stay with you. I thank you for your gracious offer, but a mere shoppe keep would not reside in the home of a gentleman. As I told your wife, I have a friend I will visit until you send word it is safe for me to return. The only way not to draw attention to myself is to continue on as I have been.”

Aaron conceded, “I do not like it, but you are right. For the

record though, whether you call yourself Madame Charlotte or Maria Theresa Charlotte, you will still remain the Princess.”

“You are too kind. I must leave now, Suzanne, I will see you and Samantha tomorrow afternoon for another fitting yes?”

Suzanne confirmed and Jean Pierre saw Maria to the door. He whispered something to her, she laid a hand on his cheek, smiled and nodded, then turned and left. With a new sense of urgency, he returned to the room anxious to have all the details in place so he could leave this entire mess behind him and get on with his life. For the first time in more years than he could count, he had something to look forward to, and he could not wait to get started.

Anna groaned, tossed down her pen, flexed her fingers and rubbed her wrist, “I do so hate this part mother.” She pulled a face at the remaining list of names on the invitation list.

“A necessary evil my dear, it is my least favorite chore as well. Have you many left?”

“A dozen or so. How about you Samantha?”

“Hmm? Oh, about the same I am afraid. We should be done before tea. Have you decided on what you are going to wear Anna?”

“I am having the emerald green gown let out. It was always Derrick’s favorite.” Anna muttered as she picked up her pen and started addressing the next envelope.

“With your coloring I am sure it will look magnificent.” Samantha smiled as she glanced at the two ladies, both with their heads down diligently writing. She was enjoying her time with Suzanne’s daughter. Other than Arianna, she never had a close relationship with another woman her own age. The night before, Anna insisted Samantha model her new gown for her.

They sat on the bed, giggled and talked for hours, Anna even took Samantha’s hand and laid it on her belly so she could feel the baby when he was kicking. Anna told her about when she had been kidnapped in the spring, how her and Derrick met, the insanity of their courtship, and, Samantha’s most favorite, stories about Christian growing up and the mischief they got into. In a relatively short span of time, they were becoming as close as sisters.

All three ladies glanced up as Edmonds, the butler, entered the room, “A package has just arrived for you Miss Samantha. Would you like it now or shall I put it in your room?”

Samantha frowned, “A package for me? Except my brothers, no one knows I am here. Who is it from?” she questioned as she held out her hands.

“I do not know Miss, it arrived by courier. If that will be all?”

“Yes Edmonds, thank you.”

All eyes were upon her as she unwrapped the package and removed the letter. She read the first few lines and smiled excitedly as she glance up, “It is from Albert. With the information he found in the locked storeroom and the information Sir Aaron sent him, he was able to trace my family’s lineage, at least on my mother’s side. He says tracing my father’s will take a bit longer, but now that he is on a mission he will not stop. He transcribed some of Cedric’s journals for me and also enclosed Deidre’s diary and a small landscape Deidre herself painted.” Samantha produced a small painting of a beautiful fall scene with the changing leaves reflecting off a pond with a stream and passed it to Suzanne. “He says the stream and pond are on the corner of his property, so the next time I visit, he will show me.”

“It is lovely. How wonderful for you,” Anna ribbed. “You do realize this means you and Christian are cousins, although several dozen times removed, but cousins nonetheless.”

“After the first hundred years, it hardly matters Anna.” Suzanne scolded, “Do quit teasing the girl.”

“Ah Mama, she knows I only jest. So, are you ready for Saturday night Samantha? I simply cannot wait to see Christian’s expression when he sees you in that crimson gown. It is so...so provocative.”

Suzanne rolled her eyes heavenward, “How did I ever raise such an insolent child? Samantha’s gown is the very height of fashion, and is it not our main focus to get that dolt of a cousin of yours to stand up and take notice?”

“Oh of that you have nothing to fear, he will notice, but so will every other wolf and rake in the room.”

“Exactly as we planned it.” Suzanne gave Samantha a conspiratorial wink and Samantha flushed. “No child, we can have none of that if you plan to pull this off. You need to drink in all the attention you will be receiving and pay my dear nephew no mind. He will come to heel in short order if I do say so myself.”

Not entirely convinced Samantha replied, “That still remains to be seen.”

“Ah, you have nothing to fret. Dangle a prize just out of his

reach and he will not be able to resist. It is a trait all Bradford men share.” Looking pointedly at her daughter she added, “And some of the Bradford women too, for that matter.”

Anna let out an unladylike snort and Samantha laughed. “Derrick was not unobtainable, he simply did not know what was best for him.”

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Since the women had monopolized the study with ball preparations, the men retreated to the library to finalize their plan. “The way I figure, their best time to strike will be when the ball is in full swing, and if the weather cooperates, a stroll along the grounds may force them to show their hand Jean Pierre.”

“How can you be so sure Winston will show?”

“For that I need to credit my wife. She made sure an invitation was sent to his elderly aunt, and being her only male relative in London, he will surely be her escort.” Aaron pointed to a rough drawing of his property, “We will have men stationed here, here and here with horses ready, so if you stay within this area, you will remain in clear view.”

“That is fine if they are planning on confronting me, but what if their weapon of choice is a pistol or even worse a rifle?”

“Although that is a possibility, I feel it is a remote one. Until they have the list in hand, you are far more valuable to them alive than dead. I would lay my money on an attempted kidnapping.”

“It is not your money I am worried about.” Jean Pierre muttered.

“Having second thoughts Jean Pierre? Both Raphael and Leonard would make passable replacements for you.”

“There is too much risk of them being detected. I am far too well known for either to make a good enough decoy.” Jean Pierre let out a sigh, “No, it is better that I see this through. Your plan for catching Winston is sound, but my only question is how do we get the men behind Winston?”

“After he has you, he will need to get word out to the people to whom he reports. We follow the courier and we have him or them, whichever the case may be. He will want to act fast, so your captivity should remain relatively brief, as soon as the message leaves his hand, we will come in, retrieve you and cart him away.”

“And if he does not act right away?”

“We will give him twenty-four hours and if he has not acted, we will come in, retrieve you and cart him away anyway, and we will leave the other fish to fry for another day. Kidnapping alone will land Winston in Newgate for a good long time. Fear not my friend, we will keep you safe.”

“I know you will, you always have, but for the first time I actually have something to live for and I do not wish to lose out on that.”

“That being Maria Theresa. If you do not mind me asking, how is it a military man and a princess fell in love? You are a gentleman true, but hardly of her standing.”

“True, and that is why we could never have acted on our feelings, but now...” Jean Pierre paused and Aaron thought that was all Jean Pierre would reveal, but then he continued, “I was one of her father’s most trusted confidants. I spent a great deal of time at his side, through that, I also spent a great amount of time with his family. Maria and I would spend hours talking and our feeling grew from there. Although she was royalty, she was not raised to put on airs, her mother taught her well. It cut me to the bone the disgusting, vicious lies they spread about the family, lies that led to them being slain. Not a day has gone by that I have not felt guilty.”

“Jean Pierre, it was not you who led them to the guillotine.”

“No, but I still breathe and they do not.” The pain in the man’s heart was evident on his face.

Aaron laid a hand on Jean Pierre’s shoulder, “Though I do not believe you should feel guilty, ease your conscious by caring for Maria the remainder of your days.”

Jean Pierre smiled, “That is my intent my friend, that is my intent.”

A knock at the door ended their conversation. Christian entered the room, “Good day gentlemen.”

“To what do we owe this honor?” Aaron asked. “I thought you were staying close to home nursing Sean back to health. We did not expect you until Saturday.”

“I have left him in capable hands. Actually, I am not here to see you Uncle, I have come to take Samantha on a ride through the park, but Edmonds mentioned you were in here so I thought I should pay my respects.”

“A drive in the park you say. In plain view of all the matchmaking mammas of the ton? What exactly are you about boy?”

“Self-preservation is what I am about. If I need to be present at this ball of yours, then by making my intentions known ahead of time to those same matchmaking mammas, I stand a chance in not being set upon by every last one of them on Saturday.”

Intrigued Aaron could not help asking his nephew to elaborate, “and what might those so called intentions be?”

“I have decided Samantha would make an excellent wife, and I fully intend on convincing her that I would make an excellent husband.”

“So she is not yet convinced of this?” Jean Pierre chimed in.

“Samantha is, how should I say it delicately, strong willed, but in time I believe I will be able to persuade her to agree to the match.” Christian countered.

“Well then my boy, I wish you the best. Personally, I could not be happier. You have made a fine choice.”

“I think so, but now I must set about swaying that fine choice. If you do not need me for anything Uncle, I shall bid you good day.”

“You should find her in the study with your aunt and your cousin.”

Christian groaned, “Thank you for the warning.” He said as he exited the room. Aaron turned to Jean Pierre and laughed, “I thought springtime was designed for romance, not November?”

Christian did find the ladies in the study as his uncle said. “Good afternoon, I hope I find you all well?”



“As we just finished the last of these blasted invitations, I would say we were just peachy.” Anna grumbled. “After my wedding, I thought it would be a good long time before I would have to do that again.”

“Oh stop your fussing.” Suzanne chided, “There were less than half the invitations as for your wedding and we had an extra set of hands helping this time. As for you, come here and greet your aunt properly.” Suzanne raised her cheek for her nephew’s kiss. “That is more like it. So what brings you here today Christian?”

“Actually, since it was such a mild day, I thought Samantha might enjoy going for a drive.” He looked at Samantha hopefully but was puzzled when she looked toward Suzanne for approval.

“Go, go. Enjoy yourselves. We are almost through here anyway.” Suzanne shooed her as she neatly stacked the envelopes in a basket to ready them for delivery in the morning.

“If you will give me a few minutes to change?” Christian inclined his head in agreement.

Anna popped up from her chair, “I will come and help you dress.” When the younger women left the room, Suzanne started in on her nephew, “Samantha is rather excited about Saturday.”

Christian raised an eyebrow, “Oh.”

“Yes, this will be her first official ball. Everybody who is anybody who is still left in town will surely be there. It will be the perfect chance for her to meet and mingle. She assures me she knows how to dance, but I am worried what her definition of dance might be. The folk dances we learned as children would hardly fit with the cotillion or the waltz of a London ballroom.”

“Of that I cannot comment, for I do not know. I am sure you will have nothing to worry about. Samantha has a good head on her shoulders. I hardly think she would embarrass you.” Christian defended.

“Embarrassing me was the farthest thing from my mind. I just hope the poor girl is not overwhelmed. The mere sight of her will cause quite a stir. She truly is a beauty, especially in that gown Charlotte created for her.”

“Is that so?” Christian grouched and Suzanne turned away to busy herself with the invitations so he could not see her smile.

“Yes, I suspect she will have a crush of admirers in no time at all.” When she regained her composure she turned back to him, “You will be dressed for the evening will you not? Your uncle does not have you stationed outside.”

“No, I will be here amongst your ‘anybody who is anybody’, and yes I will dress for the occasion.”

“Good, I do so love seeing you in your finest.” She patted his cheek and swept from the room leaving him alone to ponder the little seed she had planted while he waited.

Christian did seem distracted when Samantha entered the room, “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

He looked her over from head to toe, she wore a muslin gown the color of the autumn leaves with a matching button-up jacket, a golden yellow ruffle from her blouse peeking through at her throat and wrists. Her hair was swept up in a simple configuration with a dainty burnt umber cap atop which also matched her gown and jacket. Suzanne was right, every unattached male for miles will be falling at her feet. “It was worth the wait,” he smiled, “You look simply fetching.”

Samantha bobbed a curtsy and said coyly as she batted her eyelashes, “Why thank you kind Sir,” then ruined the act by giggling. “Do you really like the gown?” She did a slow pirouette for him. “It is considerably more fussy than I am used to.”

“I am not in the habit of handing out compliments where none are due. The dress becomes you, and it is perfect for our ride. It is mild enough that you should not need your cloak.”

“Then let us not waste any more time in here, for weather like that this time of year is a gift that should be enjoyed.”

He pulled on his gloves then took her hand and laid it on his sleeve, “My thoughts exactly.”

As soon as he led her out the door she let out a little gasp and left his side. She went directly to his matching dapple grays and ran her hand along one’s nose then the other’s, “Oh Christian are they yours? They are beautiful and so docile.”

“Not exactly the word I would use for them, but yes, they are mine and they are itching to get moving, so up with you.” He placed his hands on her hips and lifted her onto the seat, the carriage dipped

with his weight as he climbed up and took the reins. With a click click, they were off. With eyes closed, Samantha raised her face to the sun and breathed deeply, letting the clapping of the horses' hooves lull away the butterflies in her stomach. Although Christian had sent her a note the day after they had arrived in London, letting her know Sean was at his house and recuperating well and he would be spending several days at his side, she had not seen him in over a week and was feeling slightly awkward. She cleared her throat, "I received a package from your Uncle Albert today."

He spared her a glance as he eased his team into the afternoon traffic on the thoroughfare, "Oh?"

"Yes, he sent me a great deal of my family's history, Deidre's diary and a small painting Deidre made. He said it was of the pond that is still there and he would show me the next time I visit." She bit her lip to keep herself from babbling more.

If Christian noticed, he did not let on. "I know the spot, it is very tranquil. I spent quite a bit of time there when I was younger."

They rode in silence while Christian navigated the traffic. When they turned into the park he said, "Aunt Suzanne says you are excited about Saturday."

Samantha nodded, "Yes, I am. I know it may seem foolish considering all that is going on, but I never pictured myself at an actual London ball."

Christian nodded to the occupants of several carriages he passed several, "And you have a new gown?"

She laughed, "Several actually, but I will tell you no more. You will just have to wait until Saturday. You will be there, will you not? I mean I know you will be there, but I meant at the ball itself, not just at the house." *Lord help me, I am babbling.* Frustrated with herself, she bit her tongue more forcefully.

"No, I will be at the ball. What better way do I have of assessing Winston? That was rather ingenious of Aunt Suzanne to invite his Aunt. The dowdy old bitty is a cohort of some of the most influential matrons of the *ton*. Little does she know her association will bring her nephew's fall from grace."

Thankful for Christian's reprieve, at least with this topic she was on solid ground, she asked, "You do not suppose she has any

inclination of her nephew's nefarious activities do you?"

"I highly doubt it. Speaking of influential matrons, we are being hailed by one now." Christian drew his team in next to a shining black coach, "Good day to you Lady Carlyle, you are looking well."

"Young master Bradford you are looking rather dashing yourself, and who is this lovely creature you have with you? I do not believe we have ever met."

"May I present to you Miss Samantha Prichard from Kilkenny. Her late father was a friend of my uncle's."

"A pleasure to meet you my dear."

"Likewise." Samantha gave the woman her most enchanting smile, "You would be Lady Philomena Carlyle?"

Lady Carlyle looked startled, "And how would you know that? Surely my reputation has not traveled as far as Ireland has it? Perish the thought."

Samantha chuckled, "Not at all. I had the pleasure of writing your invitation for Saturday's ball at the Bradford's house. You will be receiving it tomorrow."

"A ball, how marvelous. It does get so dreadfully mundane around here this time of year. What is the occasion for this off season gala?"

"One of Sir Bradford's friends is visiting, and they decided to throw a ball in his honor. So we will be seeing you there?" Samantha asked.

"I would not miss it."

"Wonderful, I look forward to getting better acquainted."

"Yes Christian, as I said, a lovely creature. I will see you on Saturday." Lady Carlyle dismissed.

After they pulled out of earshot Christian said, "You handled that well."

"Whatever do you mean? She was a lovely woman."

"That lovely woman, as you call her, is one of the foremost dragons of the *ton*. She wields nearly as much power as Lady Jersey,

another one you will need to cut mustard with Saturday I am sure, but then again with Lady Carlyle in your corner, your success is all but assured.”

“Heavens, I never dreamed a simple party could be so complicated. It all seems quite foolish if you ask me.”

“I strongly suggest you keep that opinion firmly to yourself. These women live for such things and they have the ability to make or break your social standing at a whim, and it is of no matter that I share your point of view.”

Samantha giggled, “I will consider myself duly warned then and I promise to be on my best behavior as to not embarrass your family.”

“Truth be told, I doubt my family gives two figs, but it does make life easier if you play along. Would you care for another spin around the park or are you getting chilly?”

“I am not in the least bit cold and I would love to prolong this jaunt, but I am starting to feel a little guilty. There are still many preparations to be done and I have been away too long as it is.”

“Fair enough,” he said as he steered the horses back onto the road. “I should be getting back to Sean anyway.”

“How is he? Your note was so brief, I do not even know the extent of his injuries.”

“He suffered some scrapes and bruises, and several nasty burns. He has not needed anything for pain for the past two days, and he is starting to rebel against his mandated confinement, so I would say he is healing well. A few more days and I doubt either Elyse or I will be able to keep him abed.”

“Elyse?”

“Yes, she is the nurse who has been tending to him since he arrived in London. She would rival you in the formidability arena.”

“I am not exactly sure that was a compliment. A nurse you say, what is she like?”

“Turns out she is not merely a nurse. Her father was one of the founders of the hospital Sean was taken to.” Christian laughed, “As for what she is like, a pint sized spitfire with gentle hands and a sharp

tongue. Sean is going to have his hands full with that one.”

“So you think there is something more there than a patient – caregiver relationship?” She questioned.

“A budding romance if I ever witnessed one. They will make a handsome couple.”

As they pulled up to the gate, Samantha asked, “So with your friend well taken care of and our current situation coming to a head, I guess you will be leaving on another assignment soon?”

Christian secured the carriage and stepped down. As he helped her to the ground, he answered cryptically, “That remains to be seen. I have several things which need my attention before I can think of taking on another crisis.” At the front door, he raised her hands to his lips and kissed them, “Since you will not tell me about your gown, may I at least know the color?”

She gave him a perplexed look but answered anyway, “Crimson, but why would you want to know?”

“So I will be able to find you among the throngs of guests of course.” He kissed her hands again and said, “until Saturday” then left her standing at the front door staring at him as he drove away.

Over the next several days, the Bradford household was a flurry of activity. The ballroom was scrubbed and polished, the crystal was cleaned, the tables were arranged and set with the finest linens and china for the dinner preceding the ball, the food was prepared, and the flower arrangements were made. Even though it was a little early for Christmastime, Suzanne insisted on arrangements of holly and evergreen with white chrysanthemums. The entire household took on a festive air, but with an underlying sense of trepidation to those who knew the true reason for the event.

Smartly the men stayed out of the women's way and on the rare occasion they were asked their opinion, they simply deferred to the woman's point of view. Samantha had nearly forgotten her twin was even in residence until she literally bumped into him on Saturday morning.

"I heard a rumor that you were in London Samantha. How have you been?"

"Oh, hush. It is not as if I have been avoiding you. I have been busy." She huffed.

"I know, and you have done a splendid job, but what fun would my life be if I could not tease my little sister from time to time."

"Little in size that is all, lest you forget, I was born a full ten minutes before you little brother." She corrected.

"Ah, there is the lass I know. Nice to have you back." He said as he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Have I really been that dreadful?"

"Not enough for anyone else to notice, but then again I am not exactly just anyone."

She snorted. "Preparations are nearly done on my end, how goes it on yours?"

“Most everything is in place and it seems the weather will even cooperate.” He assured.

She eyed her brother, “You appear a might eager Liam, exactly how involved is your roll tonight?”

“Merely that of observer, not that I would shy away from any action, but I do have sense enough to defer to the professionals on this one.”

“Sage thinking, however when things start to unfold, I do hope you remember your words.” Samantha warned.

“On that note, might you have any insight as to how tonight will play out?”

She shook her head, “I am as blissfully in the dark as you are. As a matter of fact, my visions have been dormant since I left home.”

Liam teased, “Are you trying to say your visions do not cross the channel?”

She stuck her tongue out at him, “If that were the case, I would happily find residence here, but I already know it is not so.” The memory of Christian and Murphy fighting the bandits crossed her mind and she shook off a shudder.

Liam kissed his sister’s temple, “I will not keep you from whatever it was you were rushing to when you bumped into me. See you tonight.”

Samantha watched as Liam retreated down the hall and shook her head. It amazed her how they could be so similar yet so different at the same time. She shook her head again and sighed, “Now exactly where was I rushing to? Urgh, with so much still to do, it hardly matters where I start.”

Samantha busied herself with one small task after another until it was time for her to dress for dinner. Anna and she turned to make their way up the stairs when a knock sounded at the front door.

“I am right here Edmonds, I will get it.” Anna bellowed and opened the door. “May I help you?” She asked in her sweetest voice.

The young lad standing at the door looked stunned to see a lady when he was expecting a butler. He stammered, “Um, I um have



a package, a package for Miss Prichard.”

“How lovely, I shall see that she gets it.” Anna extended her hand but the boy would not relinquish the package.

Anna almost laughed but feared the boy would scurry off in fright before giving Samantha her gift. “Very well then. Samantha, there seems to be something for you, but apparently I do not look trustworthy enough to hand it to you.”

The boy flushed scarlet, “Oh no m’lady. I did not mean to imply...it is just I was told...I was told to...”

Samantha shooed Anna out of her way, “You are wretched, stop teasing the poor boy. Please excuse her, I am Samantha Prichard.” She smiled trying to ease the young man’s discomfort. When he simply stood in front of her and stared, she prompted, “You have something for me?”

Beads of sweat formed on the boy’s brow, this lady was even more beautiful than the last. He finally managed to hand her the box, but speech was beyond him no matter how many times he swallowed. Beet red and thoroughly embarrassed, he spun on his heels and made a hasty retreat before Samantha had time to give him a coin for his efforts.

The women giggled as they shut the door. “What did you do to that poor lad?” Samantha admonished.

Anna laughed, “At least he was able to speak to me. Who is it from? What is it?”

Samantha replied excitedly, “I have not a clue,” as she fumbled with the note.

*These should match your gown. I would be  
honored if you would wear them tonight.*

*~Christian*

“It is from your cousin.” She handed the note to Anna. Samantha’s hands shook as she carefully untied the ribbon securing the box. She lifted the lid and beneath, lying on a bed of black velvet, was the most exquisite ruby choker and matching ear fobs she had ever seen. She let out a small gasp as Anna peered over her shoulder. “How could he possibly afford such jewels? I cannot accept such a lavish gift.”

“Let me tell you first off, my cousin is no pauper, but if it will make you feel better, he did not buy those. They were his grandmother’s. Let me guess, he asked you what you were wearing tonight.”

“Just the color, but...”

“And if you had said green the box would have contained emeralds, and if you had said blue he would have chosen the sapphires and if you had mentioned another color it would have been the diamonds. Christian did not get much from his mother but on her death and subsequently upon his grandmother’s death, the jewels came to him.”

“These should have gone to Tess then.” Samantha stopped when Anna shook her head.

“Aunt Theresa was Christian’s mother’s half-sister. Tess was two or three when her father married Millicent. Krista was Millicent’s only blood relation.”

“I still cannot...”

“Technically he did not give them to you, he merely asked you to wear them tonight. You could appease him, then return them tomorrow.”

“I am not sure wearing them tonight will fit into your mother’s plan.”

“Nonsense, my mother would be the first to tell you a woman does not refuse jewels. You can wear them and still flirt outrageously with every man in the room. You have given Christian no promise.”

“All I think I will accomplish tonight is getting him very angry. I have seen him angry and I would prefer if it were never directed at me.”

“No one ever told you to turn into a hoyden. You just be your normal charming self and the men will take care of the rest. Oh, and it will not be you he is angry with.” Anna assured, then linked elbows with Samantha and started up the stairs. “Now, let us go and make you gorgeous. Not that I have much work to do mind you.” Samantha would have argued, but she let herself be led to her bedchambers.

The dinner guests began arriving at precisely eight o'clock, although the attendees were limited, Samantha's head started to spin after the first dozen or so couples were introduced. When there was a short lull, Suzanne whispered in her ear, "Do not fret, one of us will be at your side all night to help you keep the names straight. Ah, here Christian is now. Does he not look positively scrumptious in his finery?" Samantha drank in the sight of him. He was dressed completely in black except for his crisp white shirt and cravat. His broad shoulders were accentuated by the tapering of his jacket, which cinched snugly at his narrow hips. His britches fit him like a second skin and the shiny black Hessians completed the look. He exuded power and elegance, and Samantha's heart and stomach fluttered.

Suzanne giggled like a school girl, "I simply cannot wait to see the look on his face when he sees you." She was not disappointed for within the next breath, Christian's gaze found Samantha. His eyes traveled from the top of her honeyed upswept hair dotted with ruby pins holding her curls in place, to the crimson silk creation that lovingly draped her body, not so much revealing but hinting at the treasures which lie beneath, to the red silk slippers that peaked out from underneath her hem.

His eyes traveled back to the exposed ivory expanse of her neck and shoulders and to the glistening jewels which adorned them. A single square ruby dangled from the choker and rested lovingly between the swells of her breasts. He swallowed hard as he made his way to greet Samantha and his aunt. He brushed a perfunctory kiss upon Suzanne's cheek and said, "You ladies look positively radiant this evening."

"Thank you. I know I look passable, but Samantha will truly be the belle of the ball tonight. Do you not agree?"

Christian reached for Samantha's hand and kissed her fingers. Looking straight into her eyes he said, "I doubt if I have ever seen anyone quite so lovely."

Samantha felt the flush rising in her cheeks so she looked away. Luckily the last guest had arrived and it was time for dinner. Christian offered his escort with a bow and led her to the dining hall.

At dinner Samantha was seated between Derrick and a Barron Gunthworth from Surrey whose only apparent function in life was hunting and fishing. He blathered on and on the entire two hours of dinner. At one point Samantha pinched Derrick under the table as a not so subtle hint to have him save her. Anna, seated on Derrick's

other side, nearly choked on her wine when Derrick could not conceal his squeak. Gunthworth hardly noticed Samantha's shift of attention, he simply turned to the poor soul to his right and proceed to talk her ears off.

"Did you know trout go dormant this time of year?" Samantha hissed in a sarcastic whisper. Anna did choke at that, "Serves you right, leaving me to that wretched man all evening, and did you see the way he ate? He did not even stop speaking to swallow. I thought I would lose my supper for sure. How much longer do we need to stay here?"

Taking pity on her, Derrick assured it should only be a few more moments. Dessert was not being reserved to the dinner guests, but instead being served at midnight to the masses. Sure enough, within moments people started to rise and make their way to the ballroom. Instantly Christian was at her side to escort her. He placed her hand on his sleeve and followed Derrick and Anna from the room.

Samantha paused on the rise above the ballroom and stood in utter amazement at the throngs of people, Derrick and Anna were simply swallowed up by the crowd. Samantha took a moment to drink in the scene. The woman were dressed in gowns of every color imaginable, some bejeweled, some with feathers and a few with simply clean lined elegance.

The men's attire was as varied as the women's. Most chose the more sedate black as Christian and Derrick had, but there was a goodly number turned out as colorful as peacocks. Samantha nearly laughed aloud at one popinjay in particular. He wore purple silk pants, a red silk jacket, a limp ruffled shirt, ridiculously high-heeled black buckled shoes and the most ghastly, outdated, powdered wig. She must have made some sort of noise because Christian leaned close to her ear and whispered, "I see you have spotted our notorious Lord Winston."

Samantha looked up at him wide-eyed, "Surely you jest?"

"I am afraid not," he assured.

"How could such a flamboyant dandy expect to be inconspicuous?" She asked horrified yet not able to draw her eyes away from the outlandish sight.

"You are proof his guise works." Before she could question his comment he continued, "You yourself found it hard to believe did

you not? Personally, if I did not know better, I would not give the man a second thought.”

“I see your point. So what are we supposed to do from here?”

“I will deposit you next to your latest champion and I will begin to quarter the room. Lady Carlyle is currently speaking with Winston’s aunt. I doubt she knows anything but if she were to inadvertently let anything slip about her nephew it could prove beneficial.”

“Who is that other breathtaking woman with Lady Carlyle?”

“That would be Lady Jersey, take heed of what I told you. She is a formidable woman and she will either take to you immediately or she will cut you to the quick. With her there is no middle ground.”

“That cannot be. She is surely younger than I. From what you said I was expecting a much older woman.”

“She actually is a little older than you, and I kid you not. She is the infamous Lady Sarah Sophia Fane Jersey, heiress to Child & Co. bank. She married the fifth earl of Jersey last May but that only added to her already impressive powers. She has been a force to be reckoned with since her coming out.”

“Amazing.” She uttered in total awe.

Christian placed a hand on her lower back, “Let the show begin.” he whispered and led her to the settee where the woman were gathered. Christian bowed deeply over Lady Carlyle’s hand, then over the other two women’s. “Lady Carlyle, so good to see you again. I trust you remember Miss Prichard.”

Lady Carlyle smiled, then was surprised when Samantha came over and kissed her cheek, “I am so happy to see you again Madame, I know nary a soul here and was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Would you mind terribly if I stay with you, at least until you can tell me more about whom I should and whom I should not be associating with?”

Christian nearly swallowed his tongue when Lady Carlyle beamed at Samantha then made room next to her on the settee, “Of course I would not mind dear child and neither would my friends, would we ladies?” With her acceptance instantly assured, Christian said, “Then I shall leave you in their capable hands as I make my

rounds about the room. Family duty and all that you know.”

“Do not give it a second thought boy, Samantha will be perfectly safe with us. You just go ahead and mingle. If you are a good lad, and although it is rather unconventional because we are not at Almack, we may even allow you a waltz with this beautiful young lady.”

“Lady Carlyle, I would be honored. I never knew you enjoyed the waltz.”

Lady Carlyle cracked him with her fan, “You know perfectly well you insolent scoundrel I was not referring to myself. Now off with you before I rescind my offer.”

Christian gave her a dazzling smile as he bowed, “By your leave.”

Philomena let out an unladylike snort and waved him off. “A scamp and a scoundrel that one is I tell you, but you could do far worse my girl.”

“Oh, I am sorry, but we are not an item Lady Carlyle.”

Lady Jersey snorted this time, “Are you purposely being obtuse or do you truly believe what you just said?”

Samantha weighed her options carefully then decided the truth was her best course of action, “Honestly, I do have feelings for him, but he has stated plainly that he does not see marriage in his foreseeable future.”

Lady Jersey’s eyes narrowed on Christian’s retreating back, “Well, we will just have to see about that.”

Samantha laughed, “You sound like Suzanne.”

Lady Jersey raised an eyebrow, “I always thought Suzanne was most intelligent. What did she say?”

Samantha worried her bottom lip then confessed, “That I should use tonight to my advantage. I should pay Christian little mind and acquaint myself with every eligible bachelor in the room and have a marvelous time.”

The older women exchanged conspiratorial glances, “As I said, most intelligent.”

“Her plan would be all well and good, but I do not know a soul here and I have even less knowledge on how to attract a man’s eye let alone several men’s.”

“Samantha dear, take a moment and look around the room. What do you see?” Lady Carlyle asked.

“People, hordes and hordes of people.” She returned the smiles of several as she scanned the room.

“Sarah,” Philomena, as well as most of Lady Jersey’s parents’ long-time friends, refused to call her Sally. They felt Sally was more appropriate for a dim-witted harlot, not a Lady of Sarah’s standing. Sarah was a fine, strong name, it was her given name, so she used it. “Please tell the girl what you see.”

“I see two, no make that three Earls, one Marques, and countless other males of varying degrees of lineage showing an interest in your charge.” Lady Jersey observed.

Samantha’s eyes darted to the crowd again as Lady Carlyle said, “They are waiting for a nod from you Sarah before they approach. Be selective would you dear.”

“Add my nephew to your assembly if you would Sally, although I doubt it would do any good. I do question that boy’s mind at times, but you cannot fault me for trying,” Honoria Winston added.

Samantha watched Lady Jersey make eye contact with several of the men mentioned, and was amazed as each and every one broke off from where they had gathered and started making their way toward them.

When the last one had arrived, Lady Jersey said, “Gentlemen, may I present to you Miss Samantha Prichard. She is a longtime acquaintance of your hosts. I trust you will make her feel welcome within our circle.”

Sarah’s words were all the encouragement the men needed. After a few minutes of chatting, Samantha was being led to the dance floor by Stephen Carrington, fifth Earl of Langhorne. When their dance was over, she scarcely made it to the edge of the dance floor when another gentleman asked her to dance. After the fourth dance in a row, Samantha cried off, stating her head was positively spinning and she could not dance another step without a rest. The Marques led her to the settee and offered to fetch her some punch.

Philomena leaned into Sarah and whispered, "At this rate we will be needing to fend off the Prince Regent himself. She practically has the Marques falling over his feet to wait on her."

"Ah, but take a look at young Bradford. He has not taken his eyes off our little Samantha. In fact, here he comes now. What say I forestall him for a bit longer?"

"You are quite devious, I would wager you would give the devil himself a run for it." Lady Carlyle admonished. "He could cool his heels for a while yet, give him your worst."

Sarah gave Philomena a wink then rose to intercept Christian, "Pray excuse my forwardness, but I simply love this tune and my husband is nowhere to be found. Would you be so kind?"

Christian sent a fleeting look in Samantha's direction and at the gaggle of admirers she had gathered around her, but turned to Lady Jersey and gave her his arm, "It would be my pleasure." He had hoped his first waltz would be with Samantha, but obviously the ladies he had entrusted her to thought otherwise.

As they joined the twirling couples Sarah said, "Samantha is quite charming. In a short time she has enchanted both Langhorne and Earnstwhile, with hardly any effort on her part. She will make a lovely addition to our set. Thank you for introducing her."

Christian's eyes narrowed on the dragon he held in his arms, but his lack of response could have been attributed to his concentration on executing the tight turn on the crowded floor without faltering.

Sarah goaded him further, "I have to admit it puzzles me why you did not claim that fair creature for yourself. Is there something the matter with her?"

Christian glared at the all too innocent looking Lady Jersey, "I assure you Sarah there is nothing wrong with Miss Prichard, and if you must know, I have every intention of keeping her for myself." He paused as he negotiated the next turn, "It is convincing her of my intentions that is proving troublesome."

Sarah could hardly wait for the dance to be over so she could share her news with Philomena. On their way back she thought she heard Christian mutter a curse under his breath and she tried to hide her smile. Samantha was being led, yet again, to the dance floor, but



Christian should not take offense with her partner this time. She was on Sir Aaron's arm.

Aaron spun Samantha around, "Are you having a good time my dear?"

"Yes, Sir I am, but I am feeling a little guilty about it."

"And why is that?"

"We are not supposed to be having a good time, we are supposed to be bringing that scoundrel low." She frowned.

"Now none of that, no matter what your thoughts, you must act gay and carefree. Now laugh as if I just said something totally preposterous." She complied as he swung her around the next turn. "Much better. Has Honoria let anything past her lips?"

"Just that she questions which way her nephew's preferences lie. She did though make sure Lady Jersey included him in our circle. He has not participated much in the conversation though. He seems distracted."

"He is probably waiting for his opportunity to get Jean Pierre alone. We have taken careful measures that that will not happen until midnight. Enough of this, tell me, what has put that sour look upon my nephew's face? He looks down right mutinous."

"I have not the slightest idea. I have not seen nor spoken with him since he deposited me with Lady Carlyle."

"Interesting, well it is of no matter. If you should need any of us you only need to make eye contact and we will be at your side as soon as physically possible. You are after all the one engaging the tiger himself." He pointed out.

"I doubt I have anything to fear. As I said, he answered Lady Jersey's summons, but he has only uttered a greeting to me. I do not think he even knows who I am."

"Do not be fooled child," Aaron's eyes narrowed. "He knows exactly who you are. Execute every caution."

She assured him she would as he returned her to Lady Carlyle's side. Aaron spoke to the women for a moment before he excused himself and faded back into the crowd. After two more dances, Samantha decided to throw caution to the wind, "Lord

Winston, I have hardly had the chance to make your acquaintance. Please do not think me forward, but perhaps you would care to dance?"

He raised an eyebrow at her offer but said, "I would be delighted." When the dance began he said, "With all those eligible younger titled men who have gathered around you, I hardly thought dancing with an old fop as myself would interest you."

Samantha gave him an enchanting smile, "You are much too critical of yourself Sir. This is my first London ball and I have every intention of enjoying myself. I simply adore meeting new people, no matter what their age or station."

"You are very kind. So have you considered this a successful evening then?"

"Very much so, although there are a few more people I would like to meet."

"Really? And who might they be, perhaps I can introduce you."

Tread lightly dear girl, she warned herself. "Well, I would very much like to meet our guest of honor. It is strange, he is in residence, but with my being so busy with the preparations for the ball and with him busy with whatever it is he does, we have not had the opportunity to talk. Lady Suzanne told me he was a business relation of my father's, but I had never met him. Perhaps I am just being fanciful, but since my father's passing I feel the need to hang on to as much of him as I can." She looked up into Lord Winston's glassy dark eyes, but they gave nothing away.

"I am afraid I cannot help you with an introduction there, I do not know the man. There are two rather handsome and eligible noblemen you have not met yet that I do know, perhaps one of them would interest you."

"That sounds nice thank you. Maybe when all of the dust settles from the ball, I shall have the opportunity to speak with Monsieur de la Rues. That would probably be best anyway. You can hardly reminisce in the span of one dance."

Samantha curtsied when the dance ended, "You Sir are a well accomplished dancer."

He swept her a bow, "Thank you. Now I will bring you back

to your admirers, and I will mingle if you do not mind. If I can waylay either of the gentlemen I mentioned, I will send him your way.”

“Of course I do not mind, I have monopolized enough of you time. Thank you again for the dance, it was truly a pleasure meeting you.” He swept her another bow and left.

She was speaking to Langhorne’s younger sister when she felt a hand on her elbow, then heard a hiss in her ear, “What in the name of all that is holy do you think you are about?”

Samantha did not flinch, instead she said as she turned toward him, “Yes Mr. Bradford, I would love to waltz with you, that is if it is alright with you Lady Carlyle.”

Lady Carlyle barely looked up from her conversation and absentmindedly waved her hand at the couple. As the two made their way into the throng, Sarah whispered, “I wondered how long he could keep away. It puzzles me though, he looked more like he wanted to take a slice out of her than to dance with her.”

Philomena agreed then said, “He is not the only one acting strangely.”

“How so?”

“Take a look around. Do not be so obvious about it you little chit. Aaron is over there, his back to the wall, scanning the crowd. His son-in-law another twenty feet or so to his right, and I am pretty sure the young man to Derrick’s right is Samantha’s brother. They have placed themselves around the room like sentries, and if my theory is correct, then that young man just behind us is with them as well, but I cannot be sure. You do not know who he is Sarah, do you?”

Sarah tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as she stole a glance at the tall dark figure merely a few feet away. She leaned in toward Philomena, “Although I have only met him once, I believe that is the Earl of Wingate, Robert Farrell. He is Aaron’s step nephew. Now that you mention it Philomena, it does seem strange. No matter what, we must not let on or show too much curiosity, or whatever they are doing may go awry. You know as well as I, if Aaron has assembled his men, something must be afoot.”

“You know I would never jeopardize a plan. I wish I knew what was going on though, I would love to be able to lend my assistance.”

“Not to be harsh Philomena, but your days of assisting are a little past, and I am in certainly no condition to help either. We will have to contend ourselves with being observers this time.”

“I may be past my springtime you little snippet, but I am not willing to be counted out just yet.” Lady Carlyle huffed. “But I do agree to remain a spectator. You do not think Samantha is wrapped up in all this do you?”

“From the daggers she is shooting out of her eyes at Christian, I would say she is whether he likes it or not, and it is quite obvious he is none too pleased at the moment.” Sarah motioned with her head for Philomena to look toward the dance floor.

“Why in God’s green earth would you dance with that, that, I cannot even call him a man? Is your memory so poor as you do not remember he is responsible for your father’s death?”

Keeping a smile plastered to her lips, but her eyes blazed as she shot back, “There is nothing wrong with my memory you blockhead, and for your information, it would have seemed more strange if I did not dance with him considering I danced with every other man Lady Jersey foisted upon me.”

“Another fact that was impossible for me to overlook.” He snarled.

Samantha’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Christian Aaron Bradford, you are acting like a jilted lover. Jealousy does not become you. Now kindly stop all your blustering so I can enjoy our first waltz together.”

He actually growled as he drew her closer and led her into the first turn. They made their way up the floor before he spoke again, “I concede, I was jealous. It was not very well played of me.”

“Perhaps I can forgive you your minor indiscretion just this once, considering I have been remiss in thanking you for the lovely adornments to my outfit tonight.”

That coaxed a smile to his lips, “The do look splendid on you, do they not?”

“That is hardly worth a comment since they would look splendid draped over a cat.” He snorted and she continued, “Since it is nearing midnight, I believe you have much more pressing things to be doing, so immediately after this dance I suggest you deposit me back

where you got me and get on with your business.” Her expression sobered, “Do take care. Promise me, no matter how late it is, you will come to me tonight and tell me what transpired.”

The waltz ended, she curtsied, he bowed over her hand and kissed her fingers as she rose, “I give you my word.”

A lump formed in Samantha's throat as she heard dessert being announced. She watched an almost indistinguishable signal pass between the men around the room. Her heart began to pound as she saw from the corner of her eye Monsieur de la Rues exit the ballroom through the French doors onto the terrace. The time was at hand and for the first time in her life she wished she could call up one of her visions at will.

Lady Jersey interrupted her thoughts, "You are looking a might pallid, are you feeling well?"

Samantha attempted a smile, "Just a slight headache. Perhaps all that spinning around the dance floor."

Sarah signaled a footman, when he arrived she said, "Fetch mine and Miss Prichard's cloaks. It has gotten entirely too stuffy in here and I for one am in no need of the desserts being offered. We are going for a breath of fresh air." He nodded and disappeared to do the lady's bidding. "You will feel just the thing after a short walk on the veranda."

Samantha paled visibly. What was she to do? She should not allow Lady Jersey to place herself in harm's way, but what excuse could she possibly give. Samantha's head swam. "Here are our coats, now up up, you are getting whiter by the minute."

In desperation, Samantha tried to dissuade her, "Forgive my asking, but are you sure you should be out in the chilled night?"

"For Heaven's sake, we are not going to hike a mountain silly girl, merely take a leisurely stroll. Enough of your procrastinating, the fresh air will do us both some good." Sarah laced her arm through Samantha's and propelled her to the door. Samantha's eyes darted around the room one last time, luckily Anna caught her pleading glance and whispered to her husband. Samantha gave an inward sigh, at least someone knew where she was heading.

The night had turned crisp. The slight breeze made the lanterns that dotted the veranda flicker eerily. Unfortunately, Lady

Jersey turned them in the direction of the door Monsieur de la Rues had exited, but Samantha could not spontaneously fabricate a viable excuse to head in the opposite direction. She silently threw up a prayer that the time it took to retrieve their coats was ample time for Jean Pierre to no longer be on the veranda, but on the grounds themselves.

Samantha jumped when Sarah began to speak, "My goodness, whatever is the matter?"

*Think fast*, "If I tell you, you will think I am a ninny."

"Hardly, now out with it." She insisted.

*Pray forgive me the lie*, "I know it is quite silly, but I am terribly afraid of the dark." Sarah laughed and Samantha huffed. "See, I told you you would think me a ninny."

"I laughed because I too often feel uncomfortable in the dark. Why do you think I insisted you come with me? I truly wanted to take in some air, so your headache proved quite fortuitous." Sarah hugged Samantha's arm a little tighter and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I shall keep your secret if you keep mine."

Samantha could not help herself, she laughed and shook her head.

"Now what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking my thoughts should keep their own council as to not offend a new acquaintance."

"Samantha, trust me, you will not offend me. It is a very rare occurrence that I find someone my own age whose company I fully enjoy. I am hoping we will become fast friends, but in order for that to happen you need to stop with the 'Lady Jersey' it makes me feel downright ancient. I am Sarah or Sally whichever you prefer."

"Nothing would please me more Sarah. Very well, since my thoughts were pretty much on the same lines as yours, I was thinking that I too enjoy your company and for the life of me I cannot see how you manage to put the fear of God into those around you. You summoned the crème de la crème of the peerage with the crook of an eyebrow for Heaven's sake."

Sarah laughed, "Remarkable is it not, and if you promise not to breathe a word, it is kind of fun at times, but it does get tiresome. It

really has nothing to do with me, or at least it did not start out that way. I am sure you know who my parents are. When you control so many purse-strings, you are bound to wield a great deal of power.”

“I can see how the constant attention could become a burden.” Samantha sympathized.

“The one thing that I have never become accustomed to is being forced to distinguish those who like me for who I am as opposed to what I am.”

“Then let me tell you, I could not give two figs if you did not have a farthing to your name.”

Sarah stopped and turned to face Samantha. As she studied her, tears formed in her eyes, “I believe you.”

Samantha hugged her new friend and said, “As you should, because it is the truth.” She leaned away so she could look at Sarah, “Now, what do you say we head inside out of the cold before you do catch a chill and your husband bans me from ever seeing you again.”

“As if he has the power, but alright I will not subject you to any more of this darkness. Is your headache better?”

Samantha did not have time to answer, footsteps on the stairs in front of them made the ladies pause. Samantha’s breath caught in her throat as Lord Winston emerged from the shadows, “My goodness Sir, you startled us.” She covered her initial reaction to seeing him. “Did you find the ballroom stuffy as well?”

“Yes, yes I did, but I did not have the common sense you ladies have in staying on the veranda. I decided to stroll the grounds and I lost my footing and stumbled.”

Sarah gasped, “Are you alright? Do you need medical attention? Would you like us to call someone?”

“I assure you my lady, it is inconsequential. I merely soiled my clothing, so I fear I need to cut my evening short. Miss Prichard, if you would be so kind as to convey my excuses to our host, I will fetch my Aunt and be off.”

“Of course, be well.” Samantha relaxed when he disappeared through the doors into the ballroom. She really felt like she had just danced with a tiger and emerged unscathed, but she knew full well that if Sarah was not at her side, she would not have been as lucky.



“He is the real reason you did not want to come out here.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “But I cannot tell you anymore right now. I could not live with myself if I, even inadvertently, put you in danger.”

“Fair enough, I will not speak of it again. Let us go inside.”

Both women squeaked and spun around when they heard a menacing growl behind them. “Have you gone completely daft or is it just a temporary condition?” Christian loomed in front of them, jaw clenched, hands flexing at his sides. “Whatever possessed you to come out here?”

Sarah recovered her composure first, “If you are going to yell at anyone, then you should yell at me. I insisted Samantha accompany me.”

“Be that as it may, Samantha should have dissuaded you from coming out here. She knew full well of the danger.”

“I am sure she did, but she could not just very well come out and tell me could she? We have just met, so how could she possibly know she could speak candidly to me. I assume you did not tell her. I was coming out here with or without her, and considering we ran into that clod a few moments ago, I would say I am glad Samantha was with me. The whole safety in numbers thing you know.”

“Dammit Sarah, in your condition you should not even know of any of this, let alone try and involve yourself. George will have my hide when he gets wind of this!”

“It is not as if you are going to walk inside and shout from the rafters what you have been about. All George needs to know is I took an uneventful stroll with my new friend, and you gallantly escorted us. No harm done. End of story.” She gave him a nod for emphasis. “I will have you know before we go in, that Samantha stayed quite tight-lipped even when I had supposedly pieced things together. She is quite a find this one.”

“I agree.” He looked at Samantha who was staring at the two of them agape. “The question remains is if she believes I am equally as good a find.”

“Oh do close your mouth dear, it is very unbecoming. Forgive me my ruse, for the same reasons you could not tell me, I could not confide in you.” Christian offered Samantha and Sarah each

an arm and led them the long way around the veranda back to the ballroom.

“So Christian, is it safe to assume it was in the plans to let Winston walk out of here tonight?”

“You are not going to let this rest until you know all are you Sarah?”

“Do I ever?”

“Very well, but have it on record that I divulge this information grudgingly. Yes, we needed Winston to leave so he could lead us to the mastermind of this operation. Once he has Jean Pierre stashed away, he will not be able to contain himself. He will send word to whomever he reports to so he can cash in on the bounty.”

“And Jean Pierre is unharmed?”

“A few scuffs and scrapes, but he will mend. He could not go placidly while being abducted now could he? He got in a few good licks before Winston’s accomplices secured him. Murphy and Bailey are following them as we speak.”

Samantha stopped before they reached the door and stared at them for a moment before she spoke, “I cannot help feeling I have been played the fool. You led me to believe Sarah was not a nice person, someone I should, at the very least, tread lightly around and at the most, outright fear. And you, poor little heiress that nobody loves for herself only for her money. How much did those tears cost you? Incidentally, it may not have been the main reason I did not want to come out here, but I am afraid of the dark.”

Samantha pushed her way between the two of them, flung the French door open, then proceeded straight to Lady Carlyle, thanked her for her kindness, then stated her headache had gotten worse and she was going to retire for the evening. Head held high she exited the ball without as much as a backward glance. When Christian and Sarah returned to Lady Carlyle’s side, Philomena narrowed her eyes, “I assume you have something to do with that dear girl’s sudden headache young man?”

“Actually Philomena it is more my fault than it is his.” She looked at Christian, “If you would be so kind as to tell me which room is Samantha’s I would like to try and make things right.” After he did, Sarah told Philomena her driver would see her home, and asked that

if she saw George tell him she was going to head home after she spoke with Samantha.

“I can wait for you if you would like.”

“That is sweet of you to offer, but this may take a while. I am afraid I have made quite a blunder of things. You go ahead home and do not worry about George, he will undoubtedly head to White’s for a nightcap to end his evening.”

“Very well. Do your darnedest to fix whatever mess you made. Samantha is a lovely girl and I would very much like her to continue her association with us.”

Sarah squeezed Philomena’s hand, “I would like that too.”

Sarah stood outside Samantha’s door until she gathered her nerve, then lightly tapped. When there was no reply she knocked harder, “Samantha, it is Sarah.”

“Go away.”

“Please Samantha, I would like to speak with you and I would prefer if it was not through the door so that every servant walking by hears what I have to say.”

“Very well, enter if you must.”

Sarah did so quickly, not taking the chance Samantha would change her mind and send her away. Sarah closed the door behind her then turned and faced the room. Samantha was sitting at the dressing table, furiously dragging a brush through her hair. Their eyes met in the mirror and Samantha’s narrowed, “You insisted on this meeting, so speak your peace then leave.”

Sarah slid a small bench next to Samantha, sat, then took a deep breath, “You are angry and I cannot blame you, but what I said was the truth. I could not tell you anything for the same reason you could not say anything to me. It was of no consequence my instincts screamed otherwise.” Samantha’s only reaction was a snort, so Sarah attempted another approach, “Christian and I have known each other since we were children, I was a close friend with his cousin Anna, although Anna was a bit more rough and tumble than I was allowed to be. Christian tolerated me because I was Anna’s friend.

“When I was sixteen I had, quite by accident, stumbled across an embezzlement scheme of one of my father’s top banker’s. I

could not go to my father because how would I be able to explain my fascination with numbers and accounting, explain to him how I would sneak into the offices after dark and pour over his books and investments? Although I was not quite sure exactly what Anna's father did, I did know he had the resources to help. Anna arranged for Christian to hear me out, thankfully he believed my story and brought it to his uncle.

"Long story short, Sir Aaron was able to apprehend the man, smooth over the situation with my father, and kept me in his files as a contact for anything money related. That is how I knew about Winston, I researched his accounts for them. My knowledge of their operations is strictly limited to the financial aspect, all the rest is observation and speculation." Sarah removed the brush from Samantha's hand and turned her so they faced each other, "Samantha please, I want you to believe the only thing I held from you was my involvement, everything else I said was true. I do feel a connection between us, and I still hope we can be friends, that is if you can forgive me?"

Samantha stared into Sarah's eyes and saw the truth behind her words, "I believe you, and yes, I can forgive you, and to prove my sincerity, I will tell you how I got involved in this entire mess."

The women spent the next couple of hours talking, laughing and even crying, but when they parted, they were both secure in their new friendship, each had found a trusted confidant. Samantha had just completed getting dressed for bed when she heard a light tap on her door. She had completely forgotten Christian's promise of returning tonight to tell her how events unfolded. Quickly she ran to the door and let him in. He was leaning against the doorframe, cravat dangling around his neck, top button of his shirt undone, jacket slung over one shoulder, and in Samantha's eyes, still the most devastatingly handsome man she had ever seen. "After my exit, I did not expect you to come."

"If nothing else, I am a man of my word. Can I assume you and Sarah have made amends?" Samantha nodded. "And does that mean I have been forgiven as well?"

Samantha started to turn away, but Christian would have no part of it. He slipped an arm around her waist, turned her to face him and pulled her to his chest, "So you are going to make me work for it, are you my little minx?" He bent his head and kissed her soundly. It felt like an eternity since she had been held in his arms, and she

melted into his kiss.

When he heard her sigh, he broke the kiss and laid his forehead on hers, "If we continue, I will not be able to keep my promise." He took her hand, led her to the chair by the hearth and pulled her down onto his lap. "Bailey just returned. Winston acted far quicker than we could have hoped for. After he dropped his Aunt home, he went directly to his townhouse, and within minutes two of his men departed. Robert and Donovan followed, but I do not anticipate hearing anything from them until sometime tomorrow. Winston is on his way to Newgate and Murphy should be arriving shortly with Jean Pierre. One interesting bit of information, Winston was holding Titus' younger brother Ian captive. That is how he was able to blackmail him into betraying your father. Ian is being returned to his family and my uncle has decided not to pursue any action against Titus. He will however need to seek different employment."

"So that is it? It is over?"

"Depending on what Donovan and Robert uncover will determine the next course of action, but it is over, at least our involvement." He studied her and frowned, "You seem disappointed."

"Again it just feels so anticlimactic. I thought I would have this great sense of relief, a feeling of vindication for bringing my father's killer low." Her eyes filled with tears, "All I feel is empty."

Christian pulled her close and pressed her head to his shoulder, "What you are feeling is the long overdue grief you have been suppressing. For almost two months you have had somewhere else to focus your energy, now that is gone." He felt her tears on his skin through his shirt and his heart ached.

He stroked her hair, placed a kiss on top of her head then laid his cheek over where he had kissed, "This is probably the most inopportune time, but I have to say this. I have never felt such crippling fear as I did tonight when I saw you confront Winston on the veranda. It took all my power to stay back, watch and not react. All I could think about was in his desperation to get away, somehow he would harm you. In that moment I confirmed I did not want to live my life without you in it."

He shifted so he could look into her eyes, "I came here tonight with every intention of convincing you to become my wife, but now instead I am only going to ask you. In the relatively short time we have known each other, you have become the center of my

world, a world which would be very bleak if you were not in it. You see me for who I truly am and I am not afraid or ashamed to lay my soul bare. When you look at me, I feel like the strongest man on earth, and when you let me hold you, I feel like the luckiest. I know I have my faults, I am obstinate, opinionated, and entirely too possessive, but I know in my heart we would make a good match. Samantha, I love you. Please say you will have me, say you will be my wife and mother of my children, say you will never leave me.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she looked into the stormy gray eyes she loved so dearly, “Christian, I love you with all my heart. You also have become the center of my world and I could not imagine what it would be like without you, so yes, yes, I will marry you.”

He let out a whoop and kissed her, “Then there is only one thing I have left to do.” He reached behind him and fumbled for the pocket of the jacket he had thrown over the back of the chair. When he found what he was looking for he reached for Samantha’s hand and was surprised to see her mother’s ring still on her finger. He removed it and placed it on her right hand then slipped his ring on her left, “Please accept this as a symbol of my love. It was my grandmother’s and is the final piece to the set you wore tonight.” Samantha looked at the sparkling ruby which adorned her hand. “The announcement will be in Monday’s paper and if I can finagle it, the banns will be read in church tomorrow. We could be married before Christmas, that is unless you want to adhere to the standard period of mourning. It will be difficult, but I will wait, the decision is yours.”

“My father would not want me or my brothers to mourn, his philosophy was to always celebrate life, not dwell on death. Christmas would be a wonderful time for a wedding, in fact, I would like nothing more than to be married on Christmas Eve.”

Samantha’s eyes sparkled and Christian asked, “What is it?”

“Do you think your Aunt Tess and Uncle Albert would allow us to be married at Drunwadick?”

“I think they would be honored. I shall write them in the morning and ask. What else do want?”

“So if I ask, you will grant me my every wish?”

Christian laughed, “Although I may regret my words, yes. If it is within my power, I will happily grant you your every wish.”

“Well considering this is well within your power, you cannot say no. I want Conrad, Bailey and Murphy as guests at our wedding.”

“That is it? Your big request? No gilded carriage drawn by white Arabians? No lavish extravagance for your most important day?”

“No, that is it. There is something I will need your assistance with, but you must keep it a secret. Do I have your word?”

“I am but your humble servant. What is this secret?”

“I need you to help me find someone.” She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. “We can discuss it later.”

“Oh can we? And why can you not tell me now?”

“Because I have other things on my mind at the moment.” She started to nibble on his earlobe.

“You can be mighty persuasive when you set your mind to it.” He cradled her in his arms, rose from the chair, tumbled them onto the bed and kissed her with reckless abandon. Like a starving man being offered a feast, he relished every sigh, every moan, and when he brought them both to climax, his soul sang.

As they faded off to sleep, he heard her whisper, “Beidh mo chroí istigh ionat go deo” and he pulled her close and whispered in return, “You are the keeper of my heart as well.” She snuggled into his chest and fell asleep with a smile upon her lips.

## *Epilogue*

The holly and ivy decorated room was ablaze with candlelight. Everyone Samantha loved lined the path she was to walk. Her brothers, sister-in-law, niece and nephew were the first she saw on her left and Graydon and Kathryn on her right. Aaron leaned over and whispered in her ear, "It is time my dear. Are you ready?" Samantha smiled up at him, nodded and took his arm.

As they took their first step into the room, the harp music started. Samantha smiled as she passed Jean Pierre and Charlotte, Sarah and George, Albert and Tess, Derrick, William, Hugh, Elyse, Conrad, and Bailey. When she reached Murphy and Emma she paused and reached for Murphy's hand, "As I told you, it is never too late for love." She reached up on tip-toes and kissed his cheek then kissed Emma's as well. "I wish the two of you all the happiness this world has to give."

Aaron gave her hand a little tug and they finished their way to where Anna, Christian, Sean and the minister were standing. He turned her toward him, "I am honored you asked me to stand in for your father. He was a wonderful man and a good friend, and I know he would be very proud of you." He kissed her cheek then put her hand in Christian's before he went to stand at Suzanne's side.

The group gathered around the handsome couple, Christian in braies, hose, garters, a tunic which proudly displayed his family coat of arms, and at his side, a mighty sword whose hand carved hilt was a wolf with gray eyes, Samantha in a medieval green velvet gown with gold brocade and piping. In loud clear voices for all to hear, they exchanged their vows, and when the minister pronounced them husband and wife a cheer rippled through the room. Christian and Samantha exchanged glances for both could have sworn the cheer came from far more voices than the twenty-seven guests they had assembled. A peace and rightness enveloped the room. The spirits were finally at rest.

The first to congratulate the newlyweds were Graydon and Kathryn. Kathryn hugged Samantha and said, "I finally have a daughter and I could not be happier."



Christian bent and kissed Kathryn, "You will soon have a second daughter."

"And how is it you are so sure of yourself?" Kathryn teased.

"I already have two brothers, it is past time we had a sister." Christian stated assuredly. "I only wish Robert was here. He was the one missing piece which would have made this evening perfect."

"He knew you would understand that if it was in his power he would have been here. Has there been any word?" Graydon asked.

"No, not for a few weeks. All we know is he is with Donovan in France and they are still trying to trace the men they followed from London to their source. My apologies Kathryn, I should not be worrying you when you are in such a delicate condition."

"Nonsense, I would be more worried if I did not know. Your father has assured me Robert is in good company and should be home in plenty of time to greet his new brother or sister when he or she arrives."

"From your lips to God's ears." Christian gave his stepmother another kiss on the cheek and hugged his father. "We must greet the other guests, but we will talk again before we leave."

No sooner had they turned away from Graydon and Kathryn, Albert and Tess were at their side. Samantha reached for both of their hands, "I want to thank you again for allowing us to have our wedding here. It just felt so right having the ceremony in the great room, I cannot explain it."

Albert squeezed her hand, "I can. I know this union has both Cedric's and Ammon's approval. You have righted a long ago wrong and now have the blessings of several centuries' worth of your ancestors."

Samantha smiled at them, "Somehow I know you are right."

They stopped and spoke to the remainder of their guests before they made their way to Sean and Elyse. Although Sean was still leaning heavily on a cane, he looked devastatingly handsome, and Elyse by his side was absolutely radiant. Christian clasped his best man's shoulder and said, "And what is it that has you grinning like an idiot my friend?"

"Elyse has just agreed to be my wife."

Samantha let out a squeal and threw her arms around Elyse's neck, "Oh how wonderful!" During the weeks leading up to the wedding, Elyse and Samantha had become friends, and Samantha was overjoyed at the news. "So when will the wedding be?"

"Yes Sean, when will the wedding be, before or after you are knighted?" Christian teased and Sean scowled.

"As I have told you countless times, I could care less about the whole affair."

"Blarney and you know it. You deserve the honor, do shut up and take it in good grace."

"As if I have a choice." Sean grumbled. "Actually, we were hoping for the end of January for the wedding. You will be around to stand up for me will you not?"

"I have no plans on going anywhere any time soon, so yes, we will be there." Christian assured.

"Where will you be living?" Elyse asked.

"Christian's father has given us his country home in Surry as a wedding gift."

"How wonderful, we will be neighbors! Christian, I would like to thank you. I received a letter from my brother last week, he will be returning home just after the new year. I can hardly wait, it has been so long since I have seen him."

"I am happy for you Elyse, happy for the both of you." He shook his friend's hand and bid them good night, then turned to his new wife, "Are you ready to retire?"

"Even though I hate to see this evening end, yes I am ready to go." Samantha paused at the door to survey the room. She could not help but smile at the love she saw, love both old and new and even two instances of rekindled. In her heart, she knew she had found that same magic these other couples shared. Her eyes filled with tears, but she smiled through them. She had never been happier.

They waved a final goodbye to their guests and left Drunwadick. Samantha laughed when she saw the white carriage being drawn by two white Arabians, waiting for them. The clock tower chimed midnight and a light snow began to fall as they pulled away, away from their friends, away from their family, but toward

their new life together. A life neither would have had if they had not taken the chance.

Turn the page for a preview of *Simply by Chance*, the next installment in the Bradford series.

Robert Farrell, seventh Earl of Wingate's search for the men responsible for killing Nathaniel Prichard leads him into uncharted waters...

*December 1805, Genoa, Italy*

*This is sheer lunacy. I am cold, and wet, and tired, and hungry, and I smell! I could not be just another wastrel like most men of my age and stature, oh no, I have to be noble, take up the calling of my government. I am an Earl for God's sake! I should be a candidate for Bedlam, that is what I should be. What I would not pay for a hot bath, a home cooked meal and my bed.*

Robert Farrell, seventh Earl of Wingate, grumbled silently to himself as he hunched behind a stack of fetid crates on a dark and virtually deserted dock in what he deemed the seediest port in all of Italy, or at least it was when he was in such a sour mood. For the third night in a row, he waited, waited for the man he had followed from London, then through France and now Italy to reappear. The lout could not take much longer, surely, after three days he could not think he had been followed. Robert knew he had not been spotted, he was far too well trained for that to happen. After four years working for his government and on the course of becoming one of the finest agents under Sir Aaron's command, he had matured well beyond his chronological age. Robert was confident the man would show and, in the process, reveal whom he was working with, then Robert would be able to report in, get the support he needed, capture the bastards and go home.

A rat scurried across the crate in front of him and he shuddered, he never could stomach the vile creatures. Home, that is where he should be. If he had any sense, at this very moment he would be at his brother Christian's wedding instead of in this rat-infested hovel. This was not exactly the way he had pictured spending Christmas Eve, his twenty-first birthday.

*Damn Christian any way, it is his father-in-law's murderer we are after, it should be Christian out here freezing and hungry, not me. Oh, who do you think you are fooling? You know damn well if he were here, you would be right by his side, so quit your sniveling and be a man.*

Lord, now he was not just talking to himself, he was chastising himself right back. He needed to get some sleep. Just as he was about

to call it a night, he heard footsteps in the distance. He strained his ears, yes, they were coming closer. Robert tried to tamp down the butterflies in his stomach. This could be it, what he was waiting for. He crouched further into the shadows and waited, praying the rats would not choose that particular moment to attack. The man he had been trailing slowly materialized through the mist, stopped twenty paces from where Robert was hiding, and started to look around. A few minutes passed before Robert could hear the approach of a second set of footstep, footsteps with a distinguishably uneven gait. Mother nature, with her usual sick sense of irony, chose that moment to let the fog roll in across the water, and Robert rolled his eyes. If this did not have the making of one of those tacky mystery novels he used to love as a boy, nothing did.

The second man approached, he did walk with a noticeable limp. He was dressed completely in black, his long coat tails flared in the breeze. Without a sideways glance, he confronted the first gentleman. Robert strained his ears, but could not make out what they were saying. In the blink of an eye, the second man turned and started to walk away as the first crumpled to the ground in a heap. Robert's eyes had never left the duo, but without a doubt, he knew the man he had followed across three countries was now dead, he just had no idea for the life of him how it happened.

Robert held his breath as the new man limped past him. He was tall, not quite as tall as Robert, but of good height none-the-less, and, although the long flowing coat could be deceptive, he appeared to have a slight build. Robert scrutinized the man, but saw no sign of a weapon, no trail of blood dripping from a concealed knife, there had been no shot fired for surely he would have heard it. Now the dilemma, should he check the body to determine how he was killed and risk losing sight of this newest player, or should he take his chances and follow, hoping he will not fall victim to the same fate.

Quickly Robert took inventory of the arsenal he carried, a pistol in his pocket, one knife in his waistband and another strapped to his leg. It would have to do. He drew a silent breath and slinked from the shadows. In a short period of time, the fog had become impossibly dense. Robert could no longer see his prey, but he still could hear his muted footsteps scuffing along the wharf, step...thump, step...thump. Without a sound, Robert furtively closed the distance between them, only getting close enough that when the mist swirled he could make out a vague shadow in the distance.

Robert ducked behind another pile of crates when the man

paused before heading up a gangplank of a moored ship. When the man was onboard and out of sight, Robert crept closer. *Emaline's Nemesis* the ship read, rather ominous he thought. *Wonderful, could this day get any better? Now how, for the love of God, am I going to get onboard?*

Robert looked around. His only hope would be to somehow join the crew. Lord how he hated ships, the mere thought had him nearly retching. *This cannot fair well for me.* He gathered his nerve and went hunting for the crew of the *Emaline*.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read ***Taking Chances***. I hope you enjoyed it.

One of the hardest things about being an Indie author is getting noticed in the sea of millions of books. One thing which helps you get noticed is reviews. If you would be so kind as to post one, it would be greatly appreciated.

If you would like more, you can check out my blog at [www.christinapaulbooks.blogspot.com](http://www.christinapaulbooks.blogspot.com), my Facebook page [www.facebook.com/Christina.Paul.Author](http://www.facebook.com/Christina.Paul.Author), or my website at [www.christinapaul.webs.com](http://www.christinapaul.webs.com). All have updates from me regarding my books (current and future) as well as event appearances, and other things which may interest you. Also, please feel free to leave me comments. I love hearing from my readers, and time permitting, I try to respond to everyone.

***A final note:*** Even though all of my books are professionally edited, some mistakes do slip past and into print. Occasionally they are merely computer errors, but sometimes they are actual typos, me, my beta readers, and my editor miss, no matter how careful we try to be. If you do happen to find an error, please feel free to email me at [christinapaulbooks@yahoo.com](mailto:christinapaulbooks@yahoo.com). (For two years, one of my books contained “piece of mind” instead of “peace of mind” without anyone noticing. I can assure you, I did not mean a chunk of grey matter, so I was grateful when the error was pointed out to me.)

Thank you again,

**Christina**